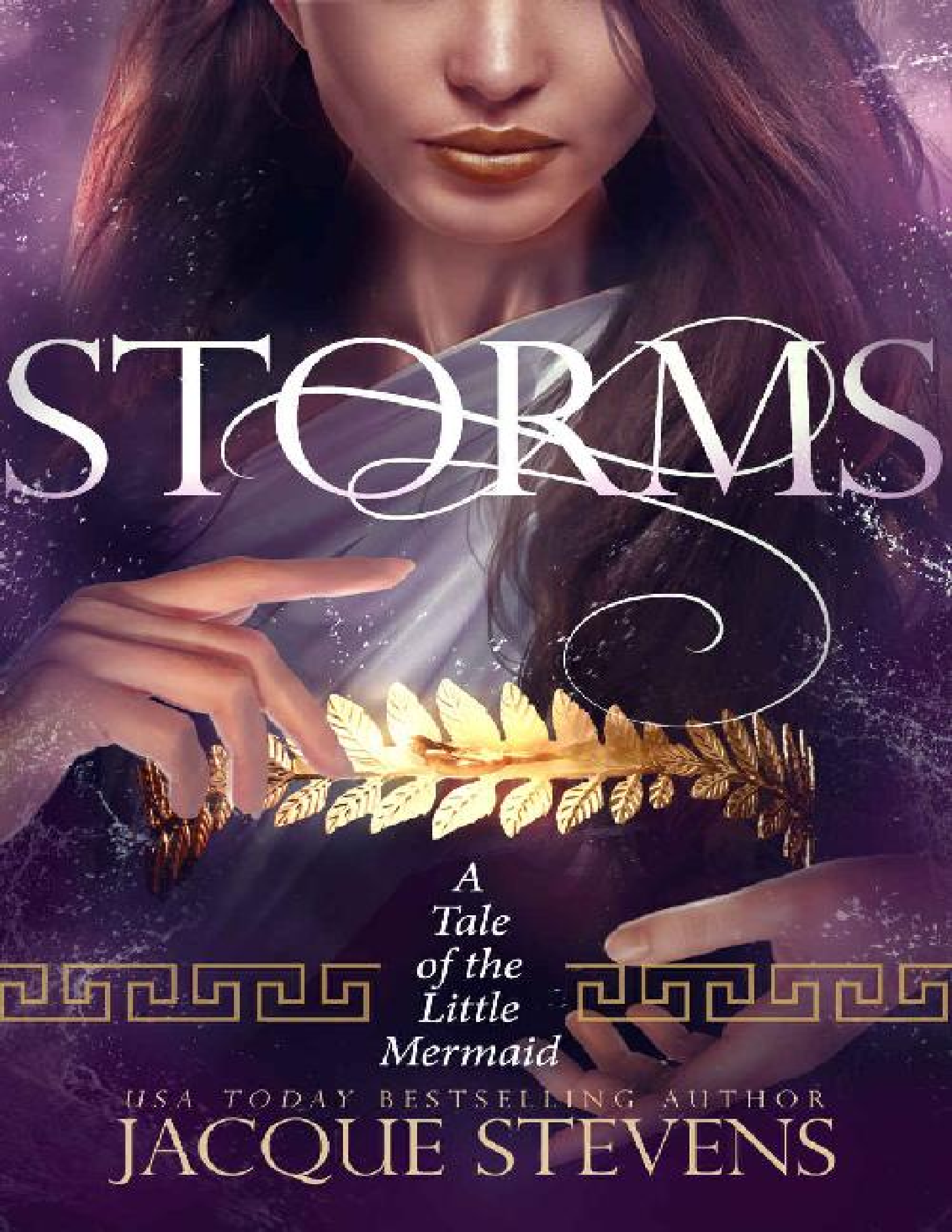




STORAMS

A
*Tale
of the
Little
Mermaid*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JACQUE STEVENS

STORMS

A TALE OF THE LITTLE MERMAID (BOOK 3)

JACQUE STEVENS

Storms:
A Tale of the Little Mermaid (Book Three)
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PROLOGUE

THE PRINCE of Solis talked so much, not even death could shut him up. His translucent image hovered in the air just to the left of me, as it always did. But this time he was looking up a vast mountainside. A rough goat trail cut up the sharp rocks, winding through the encroaching weeds. “You know there are other gods up there,” he said.

“Yes.” I huffed out the answer, more focused on putting one foot in front of another than on my ultimate goal, but of course I knew there were gods on Mount Olympus. That was the whole point.

My foot skidded across a loose stone. Dry grass blades scratched at my bare toes. My roughly calloused and tanned skin threatened to burst open, but Erys glided in front of me without a care. His earth-brown curls and the edges of his tunic moved with an artificial breeze that only seemed to affect him. I had to climb and sweat and bleed to get anywhere. He did not.

“I mean, not just Jupiter. Guardian gods. Scary gods.”

I took a breath, resting my hand against a rock so I could glare at him. The sun burned my neck, and beads of sweat gathered on my forehead. “Do you think any of them know how to banish ghosts?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m serious, Ari.”

“I am too. You’re really annoying.”

“You love me.”

“Less and less every day.” I sighed, my words already harsh and dry in my throat. While traveling in the underworld, my mortal body had somehow gone days without food or drink. Now, I couldn’t last more than a few hours. I ran my hands down my stola and tried the waterskin belted to my waist, but I already knew it was empty of both water and salt. There was

nothing for it. I had lost my connection to the sea, and I would have to keep going until my journey reached its end.

I mumbled a curse and kept climbing until a bleating sound stopped me in my tracks. Five scraggly goats stood with their equally scraggly keeper. A goatherder. I might have been able to deal with a god, but people were hard. The blood sang to me, pulsing in my ears. My tongue ran over my fangs, and I swallowed saliva, both actions involuntary.

Erys looked down at me and shook his head. He could pretend to be taller than me now, his sandals always hovering a few paces over the ground. “You want to eat him, don’t you?”

I wrapped my arms across my chest, defensively. “Only a little.”

“Oh good,” Erys said. “You’ll only eat him ‘a little’. What does that even mean?”

Despite the prince’s words, I peered over at the goatherder again. I couldn’t help it. I was hungry, and I had been out of the water for *hours*.

The goatherder finally turned like he thought I was trying to get his attention. He looked at me, his eyes expectant. Waiting. Giving me the chance to approach.

I could call him to me. I could sing.

The rust and salt of his blood could fill me like the sea.

The strength of his soul could make me feel alive again, if only for a moment.

“Well, if you think about it, it’s his own fault being out here, all alone,” I tried. Harsh lines and dark hair covered the goatherder’s face. He wasn’t young or handsome or particularly important. He might not even be missed. Only the goats and Erys would notice.

And Erys was dead and probably a figment of my imagination, so his opinion really shouldn’t count as much as he seemed to think it did.

“Yeah,” Erys said, “he likes the quiet, so he definitely deserves to be eaten.”

I got myself to turn away that time, but only to glare at Erys instead. “It may not be his fault, but it *is* yours.”

Erys’s transparent jaw dropped, and his eyebrows raised. “Mine? What did I do?”

“You turned me into this in the first place!” I gestured to myself, my arms and legs stained with dark tattoos made from his blood. His death gave me my fangs, my thirst for more blood and souls to add to my

collection. As a siren, I might not actually have to eat human men to live, but I still wanted to in the nagging ever-present way of a headache or a sore tooth.

And the longer I stayed out of the water and the base of my powers, the worse it got, and the less it seemed like it would be any kind of crime. After all, I was already responsible for the death of one person I loved, so why not a few more? I had made that case in my head a hundred times and might have cracked just as often if the boy who died, the one who had sacrificed his life for me, wasn't still there haunting and scolding me for it.

I should have been grateful, but sometimes I just wasn't.

I was hungry, and it was all his fault.

"Me? No," Erys said a little sadly. "I merely gave you my heart. What you choose to do with it has always been up to you."

I hated his words, and often, I hated him, but I walked by the goatherder and never looked back.

Neither of us talked much after that. There really wasn't much more to say. Erys was dead. He had stabbed himself in the chest so I could take his heart and escape the underworld. I had become a siren and had power over storms that I could barely control. In order to understand and fully master those powers, I hoped I would be able to meet with the god some called Zeus and others called Jupiter. They all agreed he ruled the skies from a mountain palace. They just didn't agree on where such a place could be. I had climbed all day to reach a likely seeming peak, but there was nothing here.

Another dud.

When Erys had been alive, he had spoken about his time as a foster here in Galath. He told me about the mountain they called Olympus, and I really thought this peak might be the one. Unfortunately, it was nothing but quiet fields leading up to perfectly normal rocks and perfectly normal goats. And of course, perfectly normal goatherders.

I needed to stop thinking about goatherders.

After seeing the empty peak, I didn't waste any more time to wallow over my failure. I turned my feet and quickly started back the way I had

come, letting the downward slope add more speed to my flight. I would find the real Mount Olympus eventually, but now I could at least get back into the water where I belonged.

Erys flew even faster ahead of me, but he stopped abruptly when we reached the shore. He smiled in a way that didn't quite match his eyes. "So, you want to build a raft with me?"

I rolled my eyes in response. He thought he was hilarious. But the memory those words conjured of our first meeting was no longer a welcome one. He was no longer the bright-eyed boy who had saved me from a dark island, and I certainly was no longer that naïve and innocent girl.

I was a siren.

I entered the waves with a triumphant splash. Where I could swim so fast, not even Erys could keep up with me.

Where I could actually eat.

My legs fused together under my stola and formed my blue-tinged tail. I dove deeper into the water. My mouth opened to welcome it into my body. I sank my fangs into the first fish I saw and smiled as the dark blood swirled around me.

I would stay here for a while.

CHAPTER ONE

AS A CHILD alone on a dark island, I had feared the water. But after I had traveled through the underworld and resurfaced in the mortal world as a siren, it was different. I had emerged from that dark place and was surrounded by my remaining family, my friends, even the boy I had kissed with all my heart, and I knew I didn't belong.

It started with an itch, like the nagging sting of an insect bite. A sudden dryness in my throat. I wore only a thin stola against the evening chill, and yet I felt warm.

I swallowed and scratched at my elbow, but it didn't help.

Loose dirt sloped under my toes, and the smell of rain and earth dampened my senses. Stone crosses and cherubs seemed to close in around me. I fidgeted by a fresh mound in the monastery graveyard, and Catra was talking. Or was it Corva? My sisters were so close in age and appearance they often seemed like twins, and I couldn't really see or hear the girl well enough to know which one of them it was. Her face was different too. She stood less than a few paces away from me but somehow seemed muted and blurry. Blotchy and red. She adjusted the straps of her stola and pushed back her dark hair over and over again. Her voice rose in pitch. The salt of her tears was a tantalizing smell I could almost taste on my dry tongue.

She was crying. I knew that, and I categorized all the signs of her distress, but none of them actually penetrated my heart.

Just the burning itch. A craving. I wanted to . . .

But I should be listening to Catra. Yes, Catra. Corva was inside with her infant daughter, and this was Catra. She was talking about the nuns. One of their elder members had died while I was gone in the underworld.

Something natural and human like old age, but my sister seemed terribly upset about it.

“I know how much you loved her,” Catra finished, finally waiting for me to respond.

So I tried to repeat her words, and with them, I found the cool irony of the situation. “I went to the underworld because I wanted to stop someone from dying, and someone else died while I was gone.”

She rubbed at her eyes. “No one blames you. Sister Leah was . . . She was old and—”

I didn’t need her reassurance. Not with the desperate longing building in my chest, leaching out to every other part of my body, and overwhelming every other emotion. I just needed her to get to the point. “But you still expect something from me. What is it?”

Her arms wrapped around me then. Much too warm and restricting. I couldn’t stay here anymore. I just couldn’t.

“I’m just glad you’re back,” she said. “Everything seems so dreary with Sister Leah gone, and all the fighting going on—”

“Fighting?” I asked, desperate for her to release me.

I wanted the water. I needed the water.

The itch, the burning, it just wouldn’t leave.

She had more words for me then. So many words. I caught one and then another, like sorting through a mess of darting fish. Wars had started across the sea. Erys’s bride and infant heir were at their center. The rest of the details barely penetrated, but that didn’t seem to matter anymore. I fled from the monastery to the nearest shore. I dove into the water. My legs fused together to form a fishtail under the skirt of my stola, and it seemed that I could be in Cypari and have the whole thing sorted in no time.

But as I dove deeper into the sea, the water filled me, and it also consumed me. My fins formed. My blood cooled. The burning itch faded away, and a flash of movement caught my vision. I chased a trail of upturned bubbles and white foam to find a school of fish, and nothing seemed more important. I explored an old shipwreck and a hundred other underwater treasures.

Days passed. Maybe weeks. I had no way of knowing, and I couldn’t bring myself to care. Nothing on land seemed worthy of my attention anymore. I took to riding storms, watching the sailors struggle against the waves with a strange new apathy. Even satisfaction. I never actually caused

the deaths that often followed, but there was a pleasure in seeing the strength of the sea as it brought more creatures down into the depths to drown or swim along with me.

I found peace inside the endless sea and had no desire to leave.

Then the next storm I rode proved stronger than expected. I helped it grow larger, singing as I danced amongst the tremulous waves. An uncontrolled gale threw me to an island—my island. The island of my childhood. I hit that rocky shore and instantly recognized the overgrown gardens.

I felt the twisted caverns down below.

And all at once, the water receded. I lost my fins. It seemed I lost everything. I was blind. Deaf. All my senses horribly cut to the core.

I was almost human again, and it was an awful, miserable thing.

CHAPTER TWO

I WAILED. The itch was back. The sting. The burning.

I couldn't stay here. Not on this island. Not anywhere on land. I had to return to the water, but I was almost helpless without my fins and the magic of the waves to help me along. I started a stumbling walk toward the sea. My movements were far too slow, and a figure appeared from behind the dark shrine my mother had built to the old gods. A woman stood in my way, like a porcelain statue. Bare feet. A pure white stola. She had an ageless beauty with her honey-touched hair moving about in the wind.

"Ari. There you are. We worried." Her words seemed a song. Almost like a siren, but brighter. Warmer. A sunbeam in the dark.

I didn't listen. I couldn't, not when I was so empty inside. But she wasn't empty. Life glowed inside of her, and if she blocked me from the sea, perhaps she could fill me up instead.

I showed my fangs.

She gave me a soft and sympathetic smile. "No, you can't eat me, but I know what it's like to feel that kind of hunger." She gave a slow blink like casting off an unpleasant memory. Then she held up her arms to me. "My darling, you cannot stay like this. Why didn't you become human again when you first returned to the surface?"

I didn't answer. I still wanted the sea, but something else was happening. I had lost the endless waves and a host of other distractions. I could focus more on her figure and see that it was familiar. I knew her, just as my elder sister knew me.

Serena had also been a siren, but her skin no longer bore the dark marks. Now she seemed something truly angelic. She had found her full

redemption by bonding with an ancient God of Death and dedicating herself to guiding lost souls to their final rest.

And I certainly felt lost. Did that qualify me as one of her charges?

“And where is the prince’s heart now?” she asked, and I finally had an answer for her.

“It’s at the monastery.” Jonas and the twins were there too, I remembered. I had left them along with all my former belongings and had not thought of them since.

It surged inside me again—the burn. The itch. The call to the sea. I rubbed my arms, and I could think of nothing else.

I really had no idea what the others were doing or where they were now.

Serena nodded, like all my problems should be over. “Then it is safe. Creatures like us cannot enter spaces like the monastery without invitation. You could still go back and destroy the heart as you were meant to. You could become human again.”

I shook my head, a full-body movement. “I can’t. I needed to . . .” I tried to remember. The reason was still there somewhere, just muddled. Like looking at something through smoked glass or underwater.

Not underwater. I wasn’t human anymore. I could see underwater just fine.

“What did you need to do?” Serena tried again.

“There is a war.” That was what Catra had told me after I had returned from the underworld. More of the details came to me, as if just waiting to be summoned. After Erys was lost to the sea, the Solians blamed the Cypari for his death, and the Cypari . . . Well, they blamed me. But either way, their former treaty was in ruins. The Emperor of Solis demanded Erys’s son be given to him to raise, and when the child’s mother refused, the war between the empire and the smaller island nation had begun. “The emperor has laid siege to the island of Cypari to reclaim his heir. Erys’s heir.”

“And if you go to Cypari, what do you think you will do there?”

“I don’t know.” Though the crisis should have been at the front of my mind, it now seemed a distant memory. “But it’s Erys’s son. I have to do something to stop the fighting.”

“You will not. You will smell the blood, and you will feed. You will be lost, no matter what you intend now. You are a siren, and those urges that have risen with your powers will overcome you in the end.” Her voice was harder, firmer than I had ever heard it. “You should destroy the heart.”

My own heart beat in response, her words stirring an emotion in me I couldn't quite name. "But if I do . . . I won't have any power to help." But even as I said those words, I knew the fault in them. I hadn't done a thing to help with the powers I was clinging to. I had been lost to the call of the sea. I shook again and pinned my arms around me so I wouldn't scratch. "It shouldn't be like this. I should be a neutral power, bound to the sea. That's what the old gods were."

"Yes, but any neutral force entirely without conscience is easily corrupted. The bulk of the provinces worship the One God now, and the old gods still clinging to life only have done so by making themselves into devils. My Aides might be the only exception. And you were already corrupted. You took a human's heart and lost your own. That is why a siren continues to crave blood—to restore what they lost."

I bore my fangs. That was one thing I could still defend, though I resented that I had to defend it at all. "I did not steal a heart. It was given to me."

Erys stabbed himself because he thought it would help me. I never would have hurt him.

"Yes. That might make a difference." Her eyes became a bit more distant like she was watching a dust speck float in the wind. "He hasn't moved on, you know. Your prince. He wouldn't move on when we tried to guide him to the next place, and this was likely the reason. He wouldn't leave with his family in such turmoil."

"And that is why I have to go." Though I had been reckless again, I had been right. I might not be able to save Erys's life, but I needed to fix this for him.

Serena worried her lip before answering. "You can't go anywhere without a conscience to guide you, but if the mortal willingly gave his heart, it's possible he still would be willing to help you find your way. You could replace the soul you lost by sharing his."

I wasn't entirely sure what she meant then, what sharing a soul would entail, but I caught hold of one thing. "You can still reach Erys?"

"If he wants to be reached. Aides and I have been able to guide many lost souls since you left us. I will call for your prince, and we will see."

She shut her eyes, and then, maybe the wind moved? Maybe a whisper of sound carrying in the breeze? Really, I didn't know what she was doing

or if she was doing anything at all. But I blinked once, and then the air had reformed into a familiar figure.

Ghostly and transparent, my Erys stood in front of me.

Serena had more to say, more words of advice and caution I didn't hear. But when my immortal sister and the prince who called himself my brother both agreed on my next destination, and Erys asked me if I was ready, I followed him.

We went out into the sea, and I merged with the water again. But this time it was different. Whenever I thought I might completely lose myself to the depths, he found a way to throw me out again. I wasn't always grateful, but for now, that was how it had to be.

CHAPTER THREE

EVEN AFTER ERYs had been returned to me, I didn't go to Cypari right away. I still held it as a distant goal in my head, but I wanted to be cautious. The stories I heard of the fighting had grown worse and worse. If I was going to enter a battlefield full of blood, then I wanted to be in complete mastery of my gifts. Aides had told me that Zeus might be able to answer the questions I had about my powers over the storms, so I had made finding him my first goal.

But my quest to find Mount Olympus wasn't going well. Not well at all.

And again, I didn't know how long I stayed in the water after leaving Galath and its damnable goatherder, but when Erys finally convinced me to return to Solis, the sun was setting on the seaside palace.

I refilled my waterskin as I resurfaced on the nearby shore. Then I continued up the palace steps, wringing the excess water from my hair and stola. I left damp footprints on the stone. A silent guard in an armored leather tunic put a hand on my arm. He had thick muscles and held a spear loosely in his other hand. I turned and kissed him, full and deep. Examining the pulsing veins of his skin. He already had a scar on his neck, but I hadn't put it there. I hadn't put any scars on him, and it seemed like such a waste. He would be the best one to feed on. Kissing was nice, but I wanted more.

I pushed him toward a stone column, brushing aside his shoulder strap and exposing more of his skin. My lips moved to his neck. I tasted the salt. The heat of his skin.

My fangs watered.

Erys's voice came from behind the guard's shoulder. "Ari, please don't eat Jonas."

I stepped back and glared up at him, defensive. "I wasn't going to!" I was only . . . looking. There was no crime in looking!

Jonas frowned and pulled away. He couldn't speak. "Not going to, what?" he asked, signing the words with his hands.

I blinked between the two boys, the muted one who was real and the vocal one who was not. Then I tried to answer Jonas alone. I smiled. "Uh . . . I wasn't going to miss out on seeing you. I missed you."

Jonas's expression was lost under his short beard, but he seemed a little more wary as he readjusted his tunic and stepped away from the column. He made more signs. "You find anything?"

"Not there." I had climbed all sorts of mountains that were supposed to be Mount Olympus. I hadn't found anything yet besides goatherders and other men I couldn't eat.

"But you keep looking?" He pointed to his eyes and then out at the city with his eyebrows raised.

There it was, that question again. Jonas never made demands, but he did ask questions, and I never seemed to be able to give him the answers he wanted.

I looked past him to the open archway leading into the palace. "Yes, I will keep looking, once I know another place to look." That was why I was here, after all. Well, one of the reasons. But I had already kissed Jonas, so that put finding another Mount Olympus next on the list.

The emperor had left the palace, but there were other men here I could ask. Dozens of men. All the senators and generals who hadn't followed the emperor to Cypari liked to camp and preen in the palace, make themselves a large presence, just on the off-chance that the emperor failed to return with his remaining heir and left a permanent vacancy on the throne.

I tensed my muscles, preparing myself for the conflict I would find inside the banquet hall where they held their lavish court. If they were going to sit around here and be useless, they might as well answer my questions.

"You going in?" Jonas shook his fist in the same way someone else might shake their head. "Bad idea. There could be trouble."

I shrugged. I was a siren. I could handle trouble.

I entered the palace. As I continued past the columns and near-nude statues that flanked the halls, Erys followed. He hovered in the air, unseen by all the passing guards and palace slaves. “Do you want to talk about what happened out there?”

“The kissing?” I raised an eyebrow. Erys didn’t get a lot of entertainment besides haunting me, but that didn’t mean I should have to tell him all the details of my time with Jonas.

He rolled his eyes. “Not the kissing.”

“Well, that is the only thing that happened. I didn’t do anything else.”

“But you wanted to.”

“So what?” Didn’t all girls look at the boy they desired and imagine what it would be like to move a bit closer than they had before? To feel his heat, his life blood, and long for their souls to entwine together? To feed on his flesh and drink his blood and inhale every piece of his soul until there was nothing left but a withered husk . . . ?

I shook my head. My fangs had watered, and my throat felt dry. Perhaps I did have a bit of a problem. I drank the salt and water from my waterskin, trying to quell my endless longing. The substitution barely helped, but it wasn’t as bad as Erys seemed to think it was.

I never had *actually* eaten anyone. I only wanted to.

Wanting and doing were two very different things.

“I just want you to be careful, Ari,” Erys said. “I know you don’t want to hurt anyone.”

I didn’t answer. Erys always wanted to think the best of me, but it was far too late for that. I had already pushed past another curtain and found myself in a room full of men I wanted to hurt.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHOUTED and slurred voices assaulted me from all sides of the wide room. Spoiled wine and sweat scented the air. The emperor's banquet hall had always been a place of barely contained revelry, but now the place stank of it. The brothel my twin-like sisters once worked was preferable.

A man stopped me on my way inside, slinking from the shadows. His eyes feasted on my curves before finally resting on my eyes. "Are you her? The princess?" He had a full, light beard and a rounded stomach. I guessed him to be past thirty. Maybe not quite twice my own age of seventeen years, but close.

I gave him a slow, appraising look. "You must be new." If he weren't, he would not have been so eager to greet me.

He nodded, playing with the full wine goblet in his hand. "I haven't been here as long as the others, but only because I had my own lands to settle."

"Your own lands?" I asked, indulging him for a moment, certain he had only mentioned his holdings so he could brag about them.

If I let the man talk long enough, he would dig his own grave.

"I'm a magistrate," he said. "My family owns all the orchards on the southern peninsula."

I let one of my eyebrows raise. "And that makes you think you would be worthy to sit on the emperor's throne? On Erys's throne?" I gestured to the lounge chair under the mosaic of the manticore. It only stood empty because I had bodily thrown out the last man who had tried to sit there.

He shrugged. "With you at my side, of course."

I turned my head away. Other men lounged about the room, but none of them were happy to see me. Not anymore. They knew I was the emperor's adopted princess and a potential political alliance if he didn't return home with any of his proper male heirs, but I had quickly proven I wasn't a soft, doe-eyed girl who could be persuaded to spend some time with them in the shadows.

"Other men have made that offer to me in the past. They soon retracted their offers." It was only fair to warn him, but my words only drew him closer.

He took another sip of wine, like I had been merely teasing him with my words. "They say you are dangerous, but I don't see how that can be true. You're just a woman. One that any man should be proud to call his own." He reached out to touch my hair.

I looked to the ghostly form of Erys. His fists were clenched. Perfect. He hated this man too, and we would have no argument this time.

I lifted the man up by the neck of his tunic and let his wine spill to the floor in a blood-red puddle. I was much stronger as a siren, and if I could only drink the blood I craved, I knew I could be stronger still. "All I want from you, or any man, is the location of Mount Olympus. Give it to me, or wait your turn with the rest of the vermin." I tossed him like a rag doll on the banquet table. It cracked.

I veered around to face the rest of the crowd like a gladiator entering the Solis coliseum. I picked up a three-pronged candlestick and wielded it as a makeshift weapon. "So?" I asked. "What news do you have for me today?"

Lightning flashed through the open window and thunder cracked outside. They knew I caused it. I hoped someone else would dare to fight me today. None of them did. So I threw tables, stirred up storms and pinned someone's hand in between the prongs of the candlestick I used like a triton, until one of them came up with a plausible place for me to search for my next "Mount Olympus."

Erys didn't always like it when I did that, but really, he should be thanking me. The men looked far too comfortable eating his father out of house and home.

This time, they were even more useless than usual and only had one answer for me.

Cypari.

Why did it always have to be Cypari?

“Don’t look at me,” Erys said. “I told you to go to Cypari a year ago. You know, when I actually had a pulse.” He tapped his fingers on his transparent wrist.

I did know. And maybe that was why I was still fighting it. Or at least one of the reasons. I knew I would have to go to Cypari eventually, but I had wanted to be in complete control of my powers then. The place was a massive blood bath by all reports, and I didn’t need the temptation.

Serena had been right about that. Serena was right about everything.

If I was going there now, Erys would have his work cut out to keep me clean of human blood, but then, it was hard to feel too bad for him.

After all, this was still his fault.

CHAPTER FIVE

JONAS STOPPED me again on the way out of the palace, barring my way with the length of his spear. The sun dipped behind him, adding an extra shine to his sharp movements as he signed. “You going to Cypari now, aren’t you?”

“Well, I have to, don’t I?” Everyone said I did. The emperor had called in all his alliances, every big shot hero from all over the seven seas to go down there and retrieve his infant heir from the child’s “traitorous mother.” Those were the emperor’s words, not mine, though I certainly understood them.

The girl had been Erys’s wife, but I never liked Helene all that much.

And since I had far more magic than most mortal heroes, it only made sense that I should be amongst them. They had been fighting all year, and with my help, it might be done in a week.

Jonas shook his fist like others shook their heads. “A lot of people are fighting there, so no, I not sure you have to be one of them—especially like this.” He looked at my tattoos. Or at least glanced at them. He never liked to look at them full-on. “Ari, I know you hope to find more answers there, but do you not think you might be better off leaving that part of your life behind?”

I frowned. “You want me to just give up?”

“Refusing to fight someone else’s war isn’t the same thing as losing. It is making a different choice instead.” The strength of his gaze bore into me, as if he could tell me by his eyes alone what choice he wished I would make. He was worried about me.

He was so cute when he was worried. He was cute all the time, so I instantly forgave him for acting so wary around me. I put my hand on his and tried to look as innocently love-smitten as I had been when I was human. “I’ll come back. I always come back.”

He shifted again, brushing my hand away. Not letting me trap him against the columns again. “Yes, but each time you do—Ari, you were supposed to destroy the heart the moment you got back to the surface. That’s what Prince told you to do.”

Erys shrugged, from where he hovered beside me. That *was* what he told me to do. And when Erys wasn’t telling me not to eat people, that was what he still told me to do. It would turn me human again, maybe even remove my powers over the storms, and make my life a whole lot easier.

And I still was going to do it. I just had gotten . . . busy.

“Erys didn’t know that there would be a war or that his child would be in the middle of it.”

Jonas signed violently. Wide hands. Quick movements. If Jonas could yell, I imagined this was what it looked like. “And when that war is over, there will be another one.”

I stared at the strength of the words, listening to the water lapping at the not-so-distant shore.

Jonas sighed and then started again. “Ari, you can go, and I can’t stop you, but I not know . . . I cannot keep waiting for you.”

That stopped me cold. “You’re going to leave me?” Could he leave me? He was supposed to be my guard, and more than that, we were supposed to be in love. But he did seem less and less excited every time he saw me. I just . . . hadn’t noticed.

I *had* been distracted.

“Honestly, Ari, the way I see it, you left me—assuming you ever really wanted me in the first place.”

Of course, I wanted him! I did!

At least, I thought I did. I certainly wanted to eat him more than anyone else. I dreamed about it sometimes, how his blood would taste on my lips. How his skin would feel pressed against mine. Just looking drove me mad. He was so cute and eatable even when he was pouting. That had to be love, didn’t it? Or at least the siren version of it. But I knew saying that wouldn’t actually make him stay. Was there anything I could say to get him to stay?

“Of course I want you,” I said because it was true. I just wasn’t sure how I wanted him—as a lover or a meal or maybe a bit of both.

“Then do it.” He made the signs wide. “Destroy the heart.”

“That’s not fair.”

Jonas dropped his head. “Maybe not. But when I wanted you, you chose to become this instead, to go somewhere I cannot follow.” He slumped on the steps, bracing himself with his spear and refusing to look at me. “The spirited girl I thought I loved is gone, and unless she comes back . . . Well, I not going to make any promises. But I still wish the best for you, Ari. You know I do.”

I did know. And that just made it worse. I loved him, and I thought a part of him might still love me too, but he was leaving me anyway. I had become too much for even him.

I opened my mouth then, letting out a burst of heartbreak. A burst of sound. A siren’s song. Honestly, it was involuntary, but I couldn’t say I didn’t notice how Jonas looked at me then.

How his eyes glazed.

He dropped his spear and pushed me up against the wall in a very Un-Jonas-like way.

He kissed me, caressed me. His fingers left tingles down my arm. The hunger burned between our joined lips, arms, and the slow movement of our hips. I welcomed and relished every new sensation—a fluttering of human emotion that had become dampened and chilled since I had become a siren.

This was my Jonas, what every part of me craved, and I knew I could take him, all of him. His blood, soul, maybe even the seed of his child. Something of his I could keep forever.

It was what my mother had done to my father and several men before him.

“Ari, he said no.” Erys’s words were soft but scalding.

I pulled back, glaring. Jonas still rained butterfly kisses onto my neck—whatever part of me he could reach. I wailed at the illusion I had created for myself. The illusion that the man I wanted still loved and wanted me too.

“He’s going to leave me anyway.” And part of me always knew he would.

Everyone left me eventually.

Erys nodded, looking down in the same defeated way Jonas had. I was too much for both of them. “I know. And I’m so sorry. But he said no, and if you don’t respect that . . . I just don’t know if that is something you’ll be able to come back from. Either of you.”

I screamed at him, wordlessly. A sound that might have pierced the ears of a mortal man, but Erys was dead, so nothing happened.

Nothing. I did nothing.

Jonas winced and covered his ears. I might leave him deaf as well as mute, but I couldn’t let him go. Part of me wanted to, but I just stood there, frozen inside myself, fighting a war I couldn’t win, screaming until my voice ran out.

As the echoes of my shriek died away, Jonas blinked and his olive skin went white. His mouth opened, and though he didn’t make a sound, it looked like a gasp or even a scream. Complete and total horror. He tripped over his fallen spear as he fled backward across the stone steps. He moved like a crab until he found his feet again.

He ran.

He was gone, and I was sure I would never see him again. Everyone always left me. That hadn’t changed. The only difference now was that I knew it was all my fault.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SUN SANK LOWER in the sky. The wind blew across the stone steps, carrying dirt and sand back to the nearby shore. I didn't know how long I stood staring after Jonas, but Erys was the next voice I heard.

"Ari . . ." He shook his head as if my name should be reproach enough.

It was. I knew Jonas's leaving was my fault. I knew there wasn't anyone else I could blame, but that didn't mean I knew how to fix it. My magic terrified Jonas. I had tried so hard to pretend with him, to be a girl with him and not a siren, but it hadn't been enough.

I couldn't give up my powers now when there was still so much I had to do with them.

And Erys should be the last one to complain about it. Alive or dead.

"Do you want me to save your child or not?"

Erys didn't answer.

"That's what I thought." I turned away.

"I never told you to give up Jonas for me," Erys said, becoming firmer. Despite his lithe and transparent figure, he could be fierce when he wanted to be. "And I'm sorry if the way things worked out between us made you think you couldn't have a real relationship with Jonas or with anyone else. You know I never wanted to do that."

I flinched from the words, but I didn't want Erys to see it. Yes, I knew what he wanted. He had told me in what he thought would be our last moments together. And it was complicated and messy—the same way our relationship had always been. A never-ending spiral of destruction.

I didn't want to care what he wanted anymore.

And if he said one word about building a raft, I would kill him again.

At least I could still look impassive—an easy look for a siren. “Yeah, well, we all have to live with what happened—except for you, that is.”

The itch, the burning, was back in full force, but I didn’t reach for the waterskin. It wouldn’t help me now. Nothing could. I ran down the rest of the steps. And when my feet sank into the sand and I reached the dark shore, I dove into the water and swam for Cypari.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN THE EMPEROR'S armies left Solis to sail to the small island province of Cypari, they would have been on the water for weeks. A month at least. More if favorable winds and waters didn't help to speed them on their way. Such a monotonous and hazardous journey, far from the confines of society and conscience, could make monsters out of men. I had already heard rumors of their crew sacrificing a virginal young maiden to the wind and sky, and I wondered if that was true. As only a daughter close to his own house would have been seen worthy of sacrifice, I also wondered if that young maiden would have been me if I had gone to the emperor when he first asked for me. That kind of sacrifice was something most of the old gods would have sneered at and should have been unthinkable for ones calling themselves after the One God, but beyond their own bloodlust, I had no idea what god the Solian armies were following now.

As a siren, I crossed the waters standing between the two nations in mere moments—never feeling satisfied. And even before I came out of the water in Cypari, I tasted the rusty tang of blood in the sea. Arousing my endless hunger. I followed it to its source. A broken body lay on the shore with a spear sticking out of his tattered abdomen. Other bodies were scattered on the rocks and sand. Gulls hopped over them like vultures. My nostrils flared, and saliva dripped down my fangs even though the souls I desired had long been drained away.

I refilled my waterskin as I emerged from the depths, but I feared that wouldn't be enough.

Serena was right. Everyone was right. Cypari was a bloodbath I might not be able to resist, but could I really return home now? After I had already

lost Jonas and all I said about needing to stop the war? To control the powers I had gained? To do . . . anything?

I couldn't turn back now. I didn't have anywhere to turn back to. I just needed Erys again. His ghost floated to the right and ahead of me, his head bowed over a corpse.

Was he going to do that to every single body we saw? We would be here all day.

"I knew him," he said, an answer to my unspoken question. "He was a guard at the palace."

"Well, then we know we came to the right place." My voice stayed flat, but I was glad. I didn't want to spend all day searching since we would have to do it on land. If the dead man had been a palace guard, then he also had been a part of the emperor's army. Following the trail of bloody carnage should easily lead us to the rest of them.

I adjusted my stola and made myself ready to leave.

His eyes stayed on the corpse. "You know . . . I never really liked him. I thought he spent too much time playing dice and cheating the other guards from their coin, but I think he had a daughter. I think he was good to her." Erys looked up at me. "We should bury him . . . or something."

We did not have time, but I had looked to Erys as my conscience, to recenter myself in the midst of my endless bloodlust, and it seemed I should humor him a little.

I called to the waves and the sea. Dark clouds formed to cover the horizon. Water splashed farther up the shore. It brushed my toes and completely engulfed the fallen men, taking them below the sea. All it really meant was that sea creatures would consume the wasted bodies instead of the gulls, but I hoped Erys would be satisfied.

"There. He is buried. Help me find your father."

"My father . . ." Another mix of emotions crossed Erys's face. I had expected the longing. Erys had been dead for over a year now and would miss the man who helped shape him into what he was. But there was also some hardness there. Anger. "I can't believe he started all this because of me."

I didn't respond. I knew the emperor loved his son, but hearts were devious and tricky things. Perhaps I was better without one.

We walked farther onto the shore, moving from rocks and sand to grass and then to full burned-out fields and empty barnyards robbed of their

cattle. More shallow graves or unburied corpses littered the ground. Fear had a smell. Death did too. Smoke. Rot. Stale sweat. It was all I could focus on as a siren. I drank half my waterskin before we found an active camp in the distance. A man—a live one this time—called out to me. He wore a feathered helmet and carried a spear. The Solian emblem of the sun decorated his breastplate.

“Who’s there?” His wary expression said that if I hadn’t presented myself as a lone woman, he might have thrown his spear first and asked questions later.

“Arianna. Princess of the Deep and foster daughter to the Sun Emperor.” There was a time that these titles weighed heavily on me. Like I might be crushed beneath them. Now, they seemed like the least of what I was or could be. “I wish to see the emperor.”

A familiar voice boomed behind me. “Now I am your emperor? Was I not your emperor when my son died? I summoned you then.”

I turned to face the large and bearded man without inclining my head. There were parts of him I still recognized. His boldness. His strength. But none of the cheer. Even as a slightly less cynical human, I had suspected the emperor had only kept me around for his amusement and to indulge the desires of his only son. He had never quite become a father to me, despite his claim on my guardianship.

And now he was a man at war and had no time for pleasantries, so I would give him none.

“I was . . . grieved.” Such an emotion seemed so foreign to me now, but there was no other way to explain what I had done. I had bargained with a dark god and entered the depths of the underworld to save a dead man, and even that hadn’t been enough. “I didn’t come when you first called because I thought there might be something I could do to restore him.”

This explanation did nothing to soften the man. “You should have come. Then I could have told you that your quest was a vain one. My son is alive.”

“Alive?” Despite myself, my eyes jerked backward of their own accord. Erys’s spirit was still floating body-less behind me. But no one was meant to be able to see him but me.

“Someone is impersonating me?” Erys asked, but no one would be able to hear him either.

We had both seen his corpse, after all. Just as broken and torn as the men we had found scattered on the Cypari shore. Erys had stabbed himself,

and I had carved out the heart to make my transformation to siren complete. A dark god was our witness. Valadern had once been called Poseidon or Neptune before he tried to lay claim to the underworld and made himself chief of all the devils, forcing bargains with the few mortal followers he had left in hopes of returning to some of his former glory.

“Yes,” the emperor said, the answer serving for the both of us. “The Cypari said he drowned, but my son is made from hardier stuff than that. He survived their attempts on his life and made his own way here months ago. Now he fights at our side.”

“Months ago?” Even if that somehow could be true, it didn’t make sense. “Then why are you still fighting at all?” They couldn’t fight a war sparked by Erys’s wrongful death if Erys was no longer dead. There was no logic to it.

The emperor shrugged. “We still have his heir and his traitorous wife to claim. And we are men from Solis. We don’t back down from a fight.” He let out a cry that others in the camp returned, but not quite as enthusiastically. It had been a long year.

I exchanged glances with the princely spirit again before answering. “Let me talk to Erys.” I said “talk,” but I imagined our talk would end the same way that my talks with the senators and remaining generals at the palace had gone. I embraced the coming storm.

Whoever this imposter was, he had to be stopped.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AS I WALKED DEEPER into the Solian army camp, I passed men sharpening blades. Tending fires. Mending leather. I expected that, but the women among them with downcast eyes were a surprise. The sharp cry of a baby. My eyes flitted away from them and back to my ghostly companion. “They brought their families to war? Their wives?”

Everything in Erys’s expression went tight. “Those aren’t their wives.”

I frowned and looked at the girls again. The rounder features and the lighter hair. Not Solian. Not their wives. War prizes ravaged from the surrounding farms. And the resulting children would be bastards and even slaves—depending on how much their fathers chose to favor them. Really it should have been obvious. Though none of them had been recent acquisitions, the Solian palace was filled with slaves from wars fought long ago. Bile rose in my throat, along with the salt I had consumed. Even as a siren, there were things of this world I couldn’t immediately understand.

Or make my mind accept.

Men murmured around me as I passed them, and then a yell. “Sister! You finally made it!”

Arms circled around me before I could protest. And my revulsion was instant. I wanted to hurl up all the sea water I had swallowed. It didn’t matter if the earth-brown curls and bright eyes were exactly the same. This was not the man I once called my brother.

“You aren’t Erys.”

The imposter’s face didn’t flinch. He just kept me locked in his embrace, mouth close to my ear. “Good luck convincing anyone else of

that,” he said softly. “If you want answers from me, then smile, and come with me where we won’t be overheard.”

As the man spoke, I thought I could place his true identity. And I wanted to rip his head from his shoulders. But I wanted answers too. I could do one and then the other. I didn’t smile, but I kept my mouth closed even after the imposter pulled away.

He turned, and I followed him inside a tent near the center of the camp.

A young woman inside started as we entered. A pretty girl with tired eyes—same as all the others outside. Erys had taken a war prize too? He said something to the girl in another language, and she left the tent.

But of course the man speaking wasn’t Erys. That was the whole problem. And I really could only think of one other possibility for the being who stood before me.

Valadern. The very same god I had bargained with to become a siren in the first place. I hated him so much and never truly believed he would keep to the deals he made. “You made a deal with Naman,” I said. “You were supposed to take his body.”

“I made a deal with Naman on behalf of my brother’s son and the God of War,” Valadern agreed readily. He sat back on the furs in the tent, like a man on a throne. Seeing him so stretched out, his vanity on full display, I saw more differences between him and the phantom memory of my brother. Erys had died at seventeen. He would have been eighteen now. A year older, broader, and more like his father than the skinny prince had ever been. Still no beard though. Seemed not even all Valadern’s dark powers could change that. “I helped Ares find a vessel in Naman,” he said. “And then I found a vessel for myself. Why should I steal back what I gave him when I already had what I needed? A vessel much more conveniently placed than the one I gave him?”

But the old gods couldn’t just take any vessel they wanted. Their powers had diminished with the rise of the One God, and now they could only slip into human bodies who had sworn to them in demonic rituals. I knew that had to be true. “You needed Erys to swear to you.”

Valadern nodded. “And he did. He said I could use his body to help you.”

The ghost of Erys sputtered.

“Help me?” I asked in his place, just as unsettled by the possibility. How could anyone think any of this had been done to help me?

“I gave you power,” Valadern said. “If that isn’t helpful, you will have to explain to me what is.”

I shook my head. Without human emotions standing in my way, I could recover myself faster than Erys. “And you did all this just so you could fight a war?”

“Just a war? War is how heroes and gods are made. As stories of our deeds here grow and expand into legend, our powers will too. We will overtake the One God and rule this world as we did before.”

Well, it was nice to finally understand the dark god’s plan, though he likely was only sharing it now because he didn’t think there was anything I could do about it. He had to be wrong.

At least, I wanted him to be wrong. I didn’t want to live in a world he ruled.

“I could stop you.”

“I’m happy to let you try.” He spread his arms to show me how content he was to give me full rein. “After all, you are one of my creations and a daughter of my spirit. You deserve the chance to see how great your powers can grow alongside mine. There were stories of exotic warrior women in the legendary war, and there could be in this one as well—there are enough stories here for us all. All you would have to do is pick a side.”

Pick a side? How was I expected to do that when equally vile dark gods led both sides? Both Ares and Valadern had been corrupted by using the same devilish rituals.

I turned and left the tent. I didn’t have anything else to say to Valadern or anyone in the camp. I had come here for a specific purpose—to stop the war and to save Erys’s son.

So that was all I was going to do.

CHAPTER NINE

ERY'S WAS A GHOST. He couldn't touch anything. No one could see or hear him except me. But as we left the camp, I could feel his anger swelling from him like another firestorm. A rush of heat and flame. "He took my body just to fight a war? Get himself a damn concubine? How can they even believe I would—after everything I did . . ." His words faded for a moment. It seemed that words alone couldn't contain his anger. A pebble flew like he kicked it, but that was impossible. It must have been the wind. A coincidence. "It's Valadern," he said. "He's egging my father on. Encouraging the men to follow the old gods and act like animals. I would have been able to stop this. Helene and I—"

"Well, the two of you can stop it now," I told him. The Solian camp rested in the shadow of the walls of Cypari's capital city, and now we were going up to its very gates. No one tried to stop me. No one could. Yes, I needed Erys to keep me from indulging all my passions as a true siren, but there were times he acted illogically, and I thought he might need me too. "Shall we see how your wife is doing?"

Erys went white, making his already pale figure into something translucent, but I didn't wait for him to collect himself. Seeing Helene after all this time might be uncomfortable, but it couldn't be worse than everything else we had seen.

I hoisted myself onto the tallest rock I could find, and called up to the guards, standing up on the ramparts. A bow twanged. They had shot an arrow at me. My hand moved, pulling at the wind to blow the bolt off course. "I wish to see the princess, Helene."

The guards didn't volley off any more rocks or arrows, but a spokesman shook his head. "You are a demon. The Solian Empire has been overrun with monsters, and we will not send our princess out into a battlefield."

"She is being held against her will," Erys insisted. "I know she would want to speak for peace if she was able."

"Then send someone to stand in her place," I said, trying not to let the ghost distract me. There had to be someone I could talk to.

The guard stared down at me. "You wish a champion to fight?"

I paused, digesting the question. No, that wasn't what I had asked for. I had come here to talk, but perhaps the language of violence was all that these people could understand? A champion match. If we couldn't have peace by words, then perhaps this was a viable option. One champion to decide the victor of a war that shouldn't have been fought in the first place. It would save so many lives, and I would do it.

I would do it in a heartbeat.

"Yes, I will fight a champion if you agree to honor the outcome of our fight. The forces of the loser must surrender to the victor. I will stand for Solis, and who would you send?"

The man smiled. "Naman. He has been blessed by the God of War."

Ares was the God of War. Just like Valadern was meant to be Poseidon and the God of the Sea. But I would still happily stab them both for all the pain they caused.

"Then I will face him. Send him out to me."

CHAPTER TEN

IT TURNED out that even with one side readily agreeing to a champion match, it took some time to prepare. It could not be done in secret. I had to tell the Cypari a time for us to meet—tomorrow at sunrise—and then go back to my own camp. And now I somehow had to get the Solians to agree to the terms I had negotiated for them.

Even as a human, that would have been a problem. I might have been born with the blood of a princess, but I had none of the skills. I was never all that good at diplomacy. That was why I had refused to go to Cypari when Erys had been alive and first asked me to go there. He had wanted me to join their council as his representative, but I knew it wouldn't work. Cypari might have been my native homeland, where my mother had once lived as their honored princess, but they followed a stricter version of the religion of the One God and hated any use of magic. Like my powers over the storms.

I was happy to reject them before they truly had a chance to reject me.

And I was certain the men here from Solis had made virgin sacrifices, taken slaves as war prizes, and done everything else the rumors had claimed. How was I supposed to get them to follow me?

"They can't all be monsters," Erys insisted, still hovering behind me as we made our way back to the Solian camp. "Some of them will want the war to be over, to return to whatever they left behind. They're here because they feel they have to be. Because their emperor asked them to be. They justify their actions and even the actions of those that they don't agree with by telling themselves they have no choice. So, you could provide them with one. Be another choice, someone else for them to follow."

I lifted my waterskin to drink. Empty. It had only been a day, but I had spent it walking back and forth all over this island. My stores were already depleted. And I wasn't sure when I would be able to get more. It had taken me more than half a day to walk here from the shore. I couldn't waste time going back. And while there might be some fresh water in the camp, I doubted they would have the sea water I had come to crave.

No. I didn't crave sea water as much as blood and souls, but the former had become a substitute for the latter. The camp had plenty of blood and souls to feast on.

If only Erys would let me.

We had to find a way to finish this quickly. "And what about the bloodthirsty ones who do enjoy the death? How do I convince them?"

Erys shrugged. "They will follow whoever flatters them. Or whoever yells the loudest."

"And what kind of ruler would you have been? Would you have given your people a choice or been the one who yelled the loudest?" Maybe it wasn't a question most sirens would ask, but it was an echo of a challenge I had once put to him as a human girl, asking him if he would continue the bloody demonstrations I had seen in the Solian amphitheater. I had always wanted to believe that my prince was good, but there were parts of his world that were not. And now it had crumbled into something nearly indistinguishable from the bloody world of a siren's daughter.

"I don't know. There were some things I wanted to do differently than my father did, but I suppose I never challenged him on much when I was alive." He shook his head. "I tried to do both, I guess. I always thought that it was better for the changes to come gradually and with the full support of the people we were leading. I always thought I would have more time."

"And now you're dead."

"And now I'm dead," he agreed, though he didn't let the words stop him this time. "But you know, that was one of the reasons I admired you. You were always your own person. You never let the opinions of anyone else stop you from doing what you thought was right. And in that way, maybe you can handle this better than I ever could."

That was a generous way to describe me. I should have been flattered, but I wasn't. I knew the truth. I might have been "my own person," but that was only because I didn't know any other way to be. I had been raised away from any sort of kingdom or empire. My family spent much of their time in

the sea. Even after living amongst the humans on and off for the last two years, I never connected with any of them beyond the very few I saw as my friends and family. I was willing to do things to better myself and serve the precious and rare individuals I had grown to love, but I never had the royal desire to sacrifice myself for the good of an entire nation. If I could be bolder with people than Erys could, it was only because I didn't care about them in the same way he did. Not when I was human, and not now.

Truly, I hated the war. I hated the whole island of Cypari, and I might even hate Erys. Or at least I had grown to resent him. He had died, and his body was no longer his own. His spirit was still trying to help, but he could only advise me with whatever remained of his princely wisdom, and that wasn't nearly enough. Maybe if he was here—really here—he could have done what he claimed. Given the men a choice and another example to rally to. But I couldn't do the same.

The men might act like monsters, but I was one at my core.

And as soon as I reached the Solian camp, the monster who wore Erys's face was there to greet me. Or at least to goad and undermine me. "So, what have you decided? Will you be joining our side or theirs?"

I turned away from the useless ghost and sighed. I had to talk to Valadern because he was the one these men currently followed. I saw no way to change it. "You know perfectly well that the Cypari would never accept me as their champion. They have chosen Naman. Ares. But if you agree to accept the results of our duel, then I will fight for you."

Valadern smirked in response. "So, you wish to fight alone and create legends for yourself?" Maybe his own logic and motives were the only ones he could understand, but I couldn't argue with him. Not when he was giving me what I wanted.

Perhaps that meant I had chosen to be like him—a leader who flatters and screams—but I was a demon. I couldn't inspire them to be anything better than what I was myself.

When I was human, I had such a hard time connecting with other people or even wanting to, but I cared about my human sisters. I had once asked a nun, Sister Leah, how to reach the twins when they were selling their bodies

and continuing their human lives in a similar pattern as they had as sirens. Leah told me to love them first. Perhaps something not so very different from what Erys had advised me to do when he told me to appeal to the men's best selves and give them a choice.

Maybe there was something human in these men that could yet be loved.

A part of me still wanted that to be true.

So, after I agreed to be the men's champion, I tried to distract myself from my own bloodlust by chewing on salted jerky and listening to more stories of their year-long siege. As Erys and I had both suspected, the situation with Helene and his supposed death were poor excuses to go to war, but the ones the men gave me were no better. Wealth. Honor. Better trade routes. It all amounted to the same rising tensions between the two nations that had started with my mother's broken betrothal and never quite faded away.

The Solians thought Cypari should have been theirs long ago, and that the next heir to the empire should rule them both. Now that all peaceful ways of acquiring their promised heir had failed, it seemed only natural that they should take the walls by whatever means their leaders deemed necessary. Theirs had always been the superior fighting force, even if Cypari had the home advantage.

The resulting battles had already created a few more legends. The soldiers told me of a man who was thought invincible until the Cypari struck his heel. Of a cursed plague that followed an unlucky war prize.

They laughed at their deeds and encouraged each other along.

It was no use. I couldn't love a single thing about these men or the stories they told. And the jerky wasn't actually helping me as much as the saltwater had.

The itch, the burning, was already starting.

So I bared my fangs, called myself a princess, and demanded my own tent before I ate anyone.

It was harder to pull the ghostly form of Erys away. His eyes were focused, though his form had dimmed. "There is something about all of this that is familiar. Like I've read it or have seen it all before." He shook his head and finally followed me into the tent I had claimed as my own. "I swear, if I were alive, I would have already remembered what it was."

“Well, you’re not alive.” My words were sharp, on edge as I was after spending so much time on land already. We really hadn’t shared a tent before. Never when he had been alive and not even with him haunting me so often.

Before, I had jumped in the water when I wanted rest or privacy. That wasn’t an option now. Not with so much death around and us so far away from the shore.

I scavenged amongst the furs and other supplies in the tent until I found a copper coin to suck on, but it barely helped. The itch, the burning, it just wouldn’t leave.

Erys turned away from the door to scowl at me. “Ari, I get that you’re soulless, but we both have enough to deal with right now, and I would really appreciate it if you stopped throwing my death back in my face all the time. You know I did it to help you.”

“And I didn’t ask you to!” The words roared to the surface, filled with a heat I no longer wanted to repress. “I never asked you to.” As a girl, I had come to accept that my prince didn’t love me in the same way I had thought I loved him. I thought I had moved on and even found another to love in his place, but how could I truly move on when we were bound together in this way? “You were married to Helene. You should have loved her instead, found some other way.” That was the secret he had shared with me at his death. That he loved me and would have chosen me for his bride if he had ever had a choice at all.

And I hated him for it. He might have been willing to die for me, but he hadn’t been willing to fight for me, not before making a commitment to someone else, not when it would have made a difference. We might have truly rejected the dark world of both our parents and found some happiness on our own. But no, he had to do the “noble” thing and doom us all.

“You think I didn’t try?” Again, the energy of his emotion struck me like a physical presence and the wind started to stir. “All the years I was growing up in Solis and Galath, I never spent much time with girls at all because I knew I couldn’t afford to lose my heart to any of them. That I would marry for the good of the Empire alone. I always wanted to unite the provinces and be the right kind of emperor. To be a better example to my people than my father and let the old gods die.” He shook his head, looking down. And as his words faded to a whisper and trailed off into nothing, the winds did too. “Then you appeared from the sea and saved me from that

storm; I had to know who you were. And the more I got to know you, the more I wanted to . . .”

I sucked on the copper. Though I wanted to hear his words, I could also appreciate how hard it must be to bare his soul to something as empty and cold as I was.

“But I was betrothed—to a girl I had never met. Love wasn’t supposed to have anything to do with it. My marriage was supposed to stop the wars—*this* war. And as stupid as I was, I knew you were . . . well, not stupid, but you were more isolated than even I was, and no matter what else I might have felt, I just thought that what you needed was a friend, a family. Someone who could show you what this world could be without asking for anything in return. And if I couldn’t be anything else, I thought I could be that. That I could care for the wife my father had arranged for me in all the ways that were expected and still care for you as well. Keep my heart divided between you. I thought it was the right thing to do—the smart thing.”

“Maybe it would have been if it had worked.” My tone was still biting. Maybe I was still throwing everything he had tried to do for me back in his face. But even as I said the words to condemn him, I thought how much I had done the same thing.

Erys was forbidden, but I had loved him with all my heart. And when I thought him dead, I went to the underworld to save him. I risked my life and my soul just for a chance to be near him. Our love had hurt me in a myriad of different ways. Jonas was a smarter choice. So I grew to love him consciously. Deliberately. I still believed those feelings were just as powerful and real, but before I could make a proper choice between them, I had become a siren, and I still found myself wavering between the two. Torn. Having more heated and deadly passion with one but more safety with the other. Still dreaming I could find a place where the water touched the land, and my heart and mind came together as one.

Especially now that Jonas hated me. I wasn’t so sure about Erys.

“And do you still love me now? The heartless creature you created?” I had to ask. He had said he once admired my strength, but that didn’t mean there was anything left of my old self for him to admire now. Would he have already left and rejected me if he still had the choice, if I hadn’t bound him to me with his death?

But he had been the one to give me the heart, to return again when he could have moved on. I couldn't get him to leave me completely, and perhaps that scared me most of all.

I had been left alone so many times, but my prince kept coming back to me. He was something so different from all I knew before him and still remained a mystery.

Erys hesitated before answering me, and in a way, I was grateful. I wanted the truth.

"I love you enough to know that one day, you will want something different than the mess we have created for ourselves, and I want to be there to help you get there however I can."

I still wanted to help him too. He might have been born a prince, but I still thought myself a princess—for all the good such titles ever did either of us. I never felt above or beneath him. Never had to hide. We were a tangled mess together, and he always seemed to make himself strong where I was weak. And while I didn't know much else, I knew I could never have survived so long without him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I WALKED BACK to the walls of Cypari in the morning to meet Naman. The men from the camp followed me at a distance. Sunlight streamed through a cloudless sky and laughter filled their ranks, like we had gathered for a summer picnic. They were eager to watch the show. The Cypari men mostly stayed behind their city walls, but a few of them peeked around the stone merlons. One of their number already stood before their gates.

Though well past his sixties and most definitely dead, Naman's body was strong and imposing while supported by the God of War.

I wasted no time in greeting him. My mouth watered for his blood, but I spit out the copper coin. I didn't have to fight it anymore, and it was a relief to find a man I could punish for all my pain. Perhaps even feed on. Perhaps even kill. Erys might not complain. This god was a clear enemy set on doing harm to everything I cared about.

Or at least, everything I had cared about when I was human enough to care about anything.

I called to the sea and the storms. They answered. Clouds rolled toward the battlefield in a supernatural funnel. My hair danced in my face as the rain fell. Shards of ice formed. I jerked a hand forward and shot the resulting hail at Naman.

He held up his shield and the ice shattered into thousands of glittering shards without penetrating. He stood as straight and tall as the stone walls behind him. And then he snatched a spear from his back, one of several he carried, and launched it at me.

I threw myself to the side and wind from the spear's passage whistled in my ear. When I looked back, he even seemed taller somehow. A giant,

looming over me by at least a foot and pressing steadily forward through the lashing winds, torrents of rain and flashing lightening I threw at him.

Perhaps I should have brought a weapon. My powers over the waves and the hearts of mortal men had always seemed like weapon enough, though perhaps not now.

They had not threatened him not a whit.

I scrambled back for the discarded spear, gripped it by its shaft and held it aloft, ready to strike. Now I had a weapon. But Naman, or at least, the god who held his face, was entirely unconcerned. He didn't reach for another weapon. Was he even trying to win? Or did he really think I was no threat to him? The thought of being mocked this way angered me as much as a loss.

Hundreds of lightning bolts streaked across the sky, and Erys had disappeared from view.

Naman blinked at the flashes of light and then looked back at me. "So, you are her then? You have the powers of Zeus? Of Jupiter?"

It seemed as though I did, though I had yet to discover why. I cocked my arm ready to launch the spear to prevent the next blow, but then I lowered the weapon. I hadn't looked away. I hadn't blinked. The storm still billowed around me, but Naman was gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I STARED at the empty space in front of me, blinking in disbelief. “He disappeared?” How could he have just disappeared?

I looked back to the Solian men behind me, desperate for some sort of explanation.

“He’s a war god.” Valadern stood beside the emperor and grinned at me using Erys’s face. “He grows stronger and gains more powers in battle—win or lose, it doesn’t matter to him. He feeds off the conflict. I could have told you that if you had bothered to ask me.”

On principle, I didn’t talk to Valadern. I would rather talk to the real Erys. Even if it made everyone around me think I was crazy. But his words did make a sort of sense.

From the beginning, Valadern had done nothing to impede my movements and seemed happy for me to fight on either side I wanted. Because it didn’t matter. Both he and Ares might be on different sides of this conflict, but they were feeding from the same source. The stories. The conflict. And Valadern had said he would be happy to have me as one of them and feed on it as well.

I needed to find a way to stop the war instead.

The men were riled, even after such a short display of my power. No one suggested that they actually end the fighting as I had hoped, but they argued about the results of the match. Our side shouted at the other. A few threw

their spears at the gate, and some of the Cypari shot a few arrows back. There might have been more battles after I left, more blood and fallen corpses, but I was now completely uninterested. I took myself as far away from the city as I could and spoke to my ghostly companion instead.

“A warrior with a weak heel,” Erys said. “A man who disappears in the middle of a champion match. Even the exotic warrior women. I remember. I know what this is. We have stories of a ten-year war fought over one woman—a war where heroes and gods were born.”

I shook my head. I had far too much of men boasting over war stories. “If you are such an expert, why don’t you just tell me? How did the war finally end?”

Erys looked back at the stone in satisfaction. “Those walls aren’t coming down. They never have, and they never will. So, the invading army made it seem like they had given up. They left the shore and got into their boats, leaving behind a wooden horse—a large hollowed-out structure. The people in the city brought it inside the walls, thinking that it was something made to honor the gods. They never knew that the enemy was inside the horse, waiting. The invaders came out of their hiding places at night and murdered the men in their beds, taking the victory.”

“Seriously? A wooden horse? And they fell for that?”

Erys shrugged. “Yes, they fell for it then, but maybe not again?”

I nodded, looking back over the island landscape. “Maybe we could try something else.” If all that these men wanted was a good story, I could certainly give them one.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THAT NIGHT, I didn't return to the camp. I sat myself on a rock near the city gates and started to sing. Just this time, I didn't sing for the storms. I sang a wordless song I had known from birth, one my mother and my sisters sang to draw their men out to follow them into the sea. I wasn't a wooden horse, but what were sirens if not honey-lipped traps for the unwary?

Before I had even reached the second chorus, a man with the half-moon seal of the Cypari had wandered up to my rock. One of the side gates stood open behind him. I smiled. "Oh, hello. Thank you so much for opening the door for me. I promise I will only take a moment."

The words were lies of course. I had no idea how long it would take me to walk through the city and find the prize I wanted, but as long as my words were syrupy and sweet, they seemed to enforce and work alongside with the song I had just sung.

I slipped past the dazed and blinking man and closed the door behind me, locking him out. He probably had a key. He probably would open the door and come after me as soon as my spell on him ended. But I didn't have to wait around while that happened.

I could be in and out of the city before anyone important noticed me.

I expected I might still get a lecture from Erys, but he merely looked thoughtful. "You do that surprisingly well," he said. "How many men do you think you could convince to follow you at once?"

"I don't know." It wasn't like I was ever encouraged to use my full power.

“Could you convince my father? If this doesn’t work? I just know if he was away from . . . well, who he *thinks* is me, he wouldn’t be doing this.”

It might be worth a try. If siren powers alone could take out a full army of men, my mother might have already reconquered all the lands of the sun, but if I only had to focus on the emperor just long enough to get him back on his boat and have most of his men follow. That might be something.

Either way, we were finishing things. Tonight. This war had gone on long enough already. I walked farther down the street. Nothing moved, but I found myself looking over my shoulder every so often. Even at this late hour, I was surprised how quiet the city was. It was a bit eerie. Solis was never so empty. “Where do you think all the people are?”

“Inside their houses?” Erys guessed. “There is a war. There is probably some kind of curfew.”

That made sense. Maybe it was easier to protect people who did whatever they were told, but it still gave me a prickly sort of feeling as I stared up at a lone statue of Zeus in the city square. The statue had been altered to more closely match the images of the new religion, leading to something so comical that I doubted either god would want to claim it as their own.

When Helene’s parents had come to Solis, they had looked down their noses at me. They served the One God and thought any powers I had over the storms must come from a devil. I had always suspected that the Cypari lived much more regulated lives than the people of Solis. Something like the nuns living in their monastery but harsher. The Solians often tried to combine the old gods with the new, but it seemed that the Cypari wanted to erase their history altogether.

And now I, along with the rest of the Solians, had regressed to something no one should want to emulate. The army outside the Cypari’s gates would have made them even more desperate for control, and ironically, more of a match for the harsher God of War, who stood at the head of their armies, whether they knew it or not.

It might be better if no one here saw me at all.

I kept to the shadows and alleyways as much as possible, but then I stumbled into a rubbish bin. The flickering light of a torch danced closer. I heard a shout. “You! Stop there!”

I didn’t stop. I ran to the next alley and hid.

Two armed men followed. Soldiers or guards likely meant to enforce whatever laws held these people inside their homes. And when they didn't see me right away, one started to bang his fist on a nearby door.

"Are you sure they went in here?" his companion asked.

"Of course they did," the man answered. "This house is full of heathens and lawbreakers. And once we have the proof, we can raze it to the ground."

They *wanted* to burn the house? Just because they couldn't order everyone around exactly the way they wished? This had gone on far enough; I couldn't stand for it. The harsh and commanding god they served truly seemed nothing like the one spoken of at the monastery, and the subtle corruption in these walls angered me more than the open debauchery outside. But was this something that had been there all along, or was it more of Ares's influence? Fear and war could make monsters out of men, and all the conflict here fed his power.

Not just Ares. Valadern too. They both were here to create stories for themselves, and it really didn't matter what side I sought to join. The taint of it had extended across the whole island.

The only path I saw forward was to crown one of them the victor and move on.

Even without looking, I knew Erys would hate these men as much as I did. He would let me hit them. But I needed a guard like these two men to get me inside the palace.

So I sang to them instead, and they both came to me gladly.

"Hello," I said, forcing a smile as one of the men got closer than I actually would have liked. "I'm so happy to see you. I don't suppose there is somewhere private we could go? Like just inside those gates?" I pointed to the Cypari palace.

The men blinked and happily gestured for me to follow them. One even pulled out a key. Like it was a strike of luck instead of something I had plotted in advance.

"Yes! That's just what we need." I ran up and took his arm, letting him and his companion escort me through the alleyways and into the palace. I didn't have to duck and hide anymore.

Really, I never did. Ducking was a human instinct, and I was a siren.

We passed through what must have been a servant entrance. Pots banged together as the staff cleared away their daily work. We walked past

the large kitchen and toward one of the storage rooms. Once we were there, I was done with both of the men I had chosen as my escorts. Their hands kept coming to feel my curves—another side-effect of the song, but I did my best to bat their reaching fingers away and keep them focused.

“Not too loudly. We want to keep this private, don’t we?”

The men nodded. Hooked like fish. Smiling, even when I dropped their hands completely. I let them go into the storage room in front of me and then closed the door, shifting one of the ale barrels to bar the door and lock them inside.

Then I turned away from them and found my own smile.

I knew eventually I would have to give up all the power I had gained, but it was so hard to remember the reason sometimes. It made things so much easier.

“Erys?” I asked the ghost beside me. “Can you find the princess’s room?” I had lived in a palace long enough to guess the general location, but he could go through walls.

He hesitated. “I don’t know about that. Are you sure you won’t eat anyone while I’m gone?”

I rolled my eyes back at him. “I promise. None of these men look appetizing.” Not like Jonas, though I was trying not to think of him so much.

Erys nodded, but he still didn’t go far. He just started peeking his head through walls we passed until he could wave me over to the right one. Two guards stood in Helene’s dark antechamber, but I sang softly, beckoning for them to join me in the hall.

Then, I let out a sigh. “I would love to spend time with each of you, but you know, I only have time for one man tonight.” There really was only one man I wanted to see tonight, and he wasn’t fully grown yet, but they didn’t have to know that.

The men glared at each other, and one reached for his spear. It didn’t take much more than that for both of them to start fighting each other.

Erys looked down on me then, something like pity in his eyes. “Can you at least take their weapons away? They might actually kill each other.”

“Fine,” I said. The prince was no fun at all. I snatched the men’s spears one at a time and broke the wooden shafts over my knee. Stepping around the guards who were grappling with each other, I entered the princess’s room.

My eyes roved over the shadows until I found the shape I wanted.
And from the small cot, I heard a soft coo.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MY EYES CAUGHT. I barely contained an audible gasp. I had known for a long time now that Erys had a child, a babe more than halfway through his first year. I had traveled across the sea and all the way into Cypari for the very purpose of retrieving him. But there was a difference, being told something and then seeing it. The same spell had silenced my ghostly companion.

And Erys was never silent.

“Ari?”

I couldn’t tear my eyes from the baby, but I recognized Helene’s voice. I had stayed too long, and she was rising from her own bed to stand at my side. She seemed tired and perhaps a bit confused but not really alarmed. She had never seen me as the threat that I was. “What is his name?” I asked.

“Erys. Of course it is Erys.” She said this as if I had asked her another question, but I had already known that Helene was far too boring to have an affair. And I could already see the curl of the baby’s hair and the clever glint in his eyes.

This was Erys’s child and an heir the emperor would accept.

I took him into my arms.

Helene reached out a hand. “What are you doing?”

Was she really going to try to stop me? Perhaps I should have expected some resistance from her, but she was a woman who had already thrown her own life away to stop a war. It didn’t seem too unreasonable for her to throw her son away to achieve the same end, now that I was here to give her the means to do so.

Besides, I wasn't really asking anyway. "I'm taking him away from here," I said without apology. "Surely you want that. Or have you not noticed the army outside?"

She shook her head. "So, you are taking him because you wish to keep him safe? How am I to believe that? I haven't heard one word of you in more than a year, and now . . ." She trailed off on her own, like she wasn't sure how to describe me. Fair enough—I wasn't sure *I* knew how to describe me—but I was done with this conversation.

I turned away with the baby still in my arms.

"I could scream," she tried, but without conviction.

"So could I," I spat. She might not be a man and subject to my charms, but she was nothing compared to the powers I had, and both of us knew it. I didn't fear the sound of her voice when mine had always been stronger. But I finally turned to face the young woman beside me, though it was still hard to see her upturned nose and regal pose in the dark. "Do you want to start a fight in here? Someone could get hurt." The baby could get hurt. I was sure that was what she had heard, though I had enough sense to leave that part unsaid.

"And what will happen to him if I don't?" A tremor entered her voice.

Did she have to start crying?

"He'll be spoiled rotten, just like his father." I started to go—I wanted to go, but I knew if I did, a certain ghost would never let me hear the end of it. This was his wife, after all. "I promise I will keep him safe. And you . . . you could come with me."

She shook her head, staying rooted in place. "As a prisoner?"

"As Erys's wife. As his child's mother."

If anything, she looked more fearful than before.

"You know the prince is alive," I guessed. "You have seen him."

"I have seen the monster he has become, and I . . ." She stood a bit straighter. "I am no longer Erys's wife. I am . . ."

"You married Naman." That was part of the old story after all. The fated princess ran from one man to another, and Naman led the armies here.

It was only natural that he would be given their princess.

"I wasn't given a choice," she said.

Of course she wasn't. The woman was far too biddable, far too willing to do her duty to her people before anything else, and while I once saw it as a strength, I now saw its weakness.

I despised weakness.

“Then I hope you will continue to be content with the choices others make for you.” I didn’t want to take her with me anyway. I could carry a baby. I could silence a baby—especially since he was male. She would be far more conspicuous and liable to give away my position.

I carried the baby past her and left.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I EXPECTED to hear more from Erys on the way out. The woman who had been his wife had married someone else. I held his son in my arms. But our story was never like the ones that once graced my storybook. Erys and Helene had married each other out of duty, and now their duties lay elsewhere.

The shallow bond they held was an easy one to break.

I left the city much the same way I had entered, certain no one could complain about how I had used my powers. I always said I would use my gifts to stop the war, and that was what I just did. No more death, no more fuss, and I had done it in one night. The sun cast a pink hue on the horizon as I reached the camp. I walked past the men and their morning fires until I found the emperor near the center. He was seated on a grand chair that had likely been pillaged from one of the surrounding villages and had a plate of food on his lap. I held out the baby to him. “There. You have your heir. Now you can all go home.”

The emperor stared down at the baby, but then turned away without taking him from me. “So, Erys. What do you think? Is this your son?”

The imposter came to the emperor’s side and shrugged. “Who can say? But I imagine he’ll do well enough.”

The emperor set aside his food and stood. He stretched and reached for his spear. “Excellent. Now we can take the city much easier.” He took the baby and handed him to a soldier behind him. “Find a wetnurse among the slaves. We’ll push out the ships, and once they let down their guard, we can continue our work. Same as last time.”

What? They were still going to try to take the city? This was meant to stop the fighting. “I brought you your heir.”

The emperor nodded. “And I am grateful. Now we can continue our campaign without worrying about damaging our prize. But we need a better victory than can be gained by one thief in the night. We need a victory that will give us the honor of the gods.”

My jaw tightened. Erys was right. The emperor really didn’t sound like himself. He had been under Valadern’s influence far too long. The emperor sounded just like him.

I could use my power to call him away, like Erys wanted.

I opened my mouth. My ghostly prince silently shook his head. Erys still thought I should wait until the emperor was alone, but we didn’t have time for that, and I had yet to find limits to my powers.

I sang. The wordless and haunting sound echoed over the camp, but the emperor barely blinked at me. I sang longer. The soldier next to him took a step forward, but the emperor’s expression didn’t change. What was wrong? It had always worked before.

I tried harder. My voice grew louder, drawing in more and more of the surrounding men to turn my way. One man reached for my curves. I sidestepped him, only to put myself closer to another man. A full army of reaching hands and lustful eyes moved in to accost me.

The truth hit me cold. The problem wasn’t that I couldn’t use my magic to enslave an army of men. The problem was that I could. And now all of them wanted me at once.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE MORE I SANG, trying to regain control, the worse it got. A man tugged at my hair. Two men yanked at my arm at once. I stumbled to the ground. They laughed like drunkards, and more of them reached to hold me down. Foul breath and sweat from a thousand stinking bodies enveloped me in a choking cloud.

The only ones not affected were the emperor and Valadern.

Erys was yelling. My Erys, of course. The ghost. He couldn't actually help me. I couldn't help myself. A sharp pain flashed through my head as it bounced off of something hard on the ground. A rock. My vision blurred and started to dim. My eyes closed, embracing the darkness. Blackness was better than the horrors surrounding me. Just as the mob I had created was about to tear me apart, thunder boomed in the distance, echoing across the sky. One man released me and then another. I opened my eyes to see lightning splitting the sky. I hadn't summoned it.

The emperor stood over me, and all the men were brought to heel behind him. "Now, we cannot have you treating my daughter like that."

Daughter? Despite his role as my guardian, the emperor had never called me that. I never wanted him to, as the endearment only brought memories of my mother and others who wanted to use me by claiming me as their own. I gathered myself into a crouch, ready for more trouble. Erys was right. There was no way that was the man we both knew. "Who are you?"

He laughed. "You don't know? The way I heard it, you have been searching all over the globe for me."

Zeus? This was Zeus?

That couldn't be right. "You're Erys's father."

"At one time, my vessel was. And then he swore to me for power. To get vengeance on his enemies."

I thought again of the rumors of the bloody sacrifices made when the men were at sea. Was that what happened? The emperor swore himself to his vengeance, and something else took over. A dark and ancient power that had been fully corrupted by an innocent death. "You have power over lightning. The same power I have," I said.

"Yes, and if this city was still like it was in the old days, you would have been made its ruler and worshiped as I was."

Erys floated closer and nodded then, as if what the man said actually made sense to him. "Before the rise of the One God, it was said that the old gods often walked the earth while taking the forms of both men and beasts. In the old story, the woman everyone fought over was considered the most beautiful because she was the daughter of Jupiter. Is he saying that you are too? Or one of your ancestors?"

"My mother had power over the storms even before she became a siren, and she was Cypari's heir," I said. That was the royal line, the line of the gods that made the blade I once carried glow for my blood.

The Cypari still had icons dedicated to the old sky god.

The emperor nodded, though he addressed me alone. "You were the daughter of your mother's favorite lover and the only one she married. Of course you were the one to inherit my powers from her."

Serena had told me that my father had stayed on the island longer than any of the other men Mother had caught. He was a poet and storyteller. He transcribed all the fairy stories and legends into a book I once treasured. My mother found him more amusing than the usual sort of sailor that came to our island. Amusing enough to marry him? If she had, it would have only been a mocking perversion of any proper union.

I shook my head, not liking the images those thoughts created.

"That's it? The only reason I have this magic is because my sisters were bastards, and I was not?" Somehow, I always thought it would be something more significant than that. Something meaningful. But it wasn't. Just a fluke.

Just an endless war that never should have been mine.

Another bolt of lightning flashed. Had I done that? Maybe. But Erys was far angrier than I was. The man who stood before us as the emperor

was an imposter. Erys's father was dead. Valadern had summoned another of the old gods to murder him.

And there seemed to be nothing we could do about it. We had no allies here, and just by trying to play in this game of war, we had become the only true losers.

At least on this, the emperor and even Valadern seemed to agree. He turned to the men, quickly dismissing me. "We will march to the field of battle, to see who among us will be proclaimed a hero and will be worshiped into the next age" His mouth turned down in scorn. "You may stay here with the rest of the women if you wish."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MY STOLA HAD BEEN TORN at the sleeve. I picked at it, staying rooted in my spot in the center of the army camp until most of the men had left. By then, I was ready for my next task. I had feared men as a girl, long before any of them had touched me. I was glad I wasn't human now, that I didn't have my heart to lose. Despite being manhandled by a mob, I didn't have to stand here and shake or listen to the ghost of Erys say meaningless things to comfort me.

This war was over, at least it was as far as I was concerned. We were going home. The rest of the men could kill each other for all I cared, but Erys and I were going home, and we were taking the baby with us. The slaves he had been left with were willing to give him up, and I quickly turned to the shore. Perhaps a girl with a heart would have wanted to save more than the child alone, but that wasn't who I was anymore.

I saw no one here I wanted to save, only those who allowed themselves to be monsters and those who allowed themselves to be prey. This was a war that never should have been mine.

My grip tightened. We had barely made it a few paces away from the camp and toward the distant shore before the baby started crying.

"What do we do?" Erys asked, his eyes wide.

"Don't look at me. He's your son."

"Yeah, but it's not like we were researching child-rearing methods when we made him."

"Ew, Erys."

He shook his head. I no longer felt the call to the sea, but I could feel some of his helplessness. Like a light tugging on my arm. "I wish we could

have found some way to bring Helene with us. I know you thought she was boring, and sometimes I did too, but I wasn't worried about having a child or anything else because I just knew she could handle it. She always seemed so confident. Graceful." He rubbed the back of his neck as he looked over at me. "She was . . . what do you call that?"

I pictured strong and steady arms. A soft smile. I knew exactly what that was called, because I had felt it once before. "She was your anchor."

Erys paused for a moment, and then he nodded. "Yeah. How did you know?"

I didn't answer, but his eyes widened, and he knew.

"Oh, Ari, I'm sorry."

I shook my head. I really didn't want to think about Jonas right now. "I never felt good enough for him. I know you thought you found me the perfect match, but that's just it. Jonas might have been perfect, but I wasn't. I wasn't even good. I just . . ."

The baby kept crying. He had gotten one arm out of his blankets and started flailing. And I needed my heart back because I wanted to fling him back to the slaves we had just taken him from or even against a rock. Anything to silence the noise.

Erys blinked down at him more curiously. "Can't you feed him or something? I mean, you're a woman."

"That's not how it works. My breasts are about as useful as yours at the moment."

Erys took a step back, his nose wrinkling. "I do not have breasts."

I ignored him. We were both useless and weren't making any progress this way. "We have to find someone who has a baby . . ." I thought of the slaves we had just left, but only for a moment. I didn't want to go backward. My part in this war was over, and I already had another solution. "Corva. Her daughter should be about his age."

"Isn't she across the sea?"

"We *want* to take him across the sea and away from this death trap," I reminded him. "I can put him in something and sing to him."

Erys glared. "Ari, if you eat my baby, then so help me—"

"I'm not going to eat him. I just want to calm him down, that's all."

Erys folded his arms across his chest. "That better be all."

"You know you can't threaten me. You're a ghost. You can't actually do anything but yell." But I didn't really think that was true anymore. I could

feel him, and he had started influencing how the storms grew around me. We were becoming more entangled as time went on, and I wasn't certain that was a good thing. I might not have spilled blood or fed on any other man as a siren, and Erys might have willingly given me his heart, but I was still feeding off of him.

We lived a half-life together, me without my soul. Him without his body. Neither of us whole without the other. Our love had never been what it should have been, and now it had become a dark and twisted thing.

It wasn't right, and it was never meant to last forever.

I wasn't able to stop the war or do anything truly useful with the powers I had gained, but if I was going back to the monastery, then maybe there was something else I could do there.

Something I should have done from the very beginning.

"Yelling has worked well enough so far," Erys said with a shrug, seeming oblivious to my somber mood and what our change in course would actually mean for him. There was an innocent sweetness to his ignorance that still had a draw on me. Or maybe it wasn't ignorance, but the uncaring willingness he had to do whatever was necessary. My prince had always been that way. He knelt down amongst the driftwood, ready to get started on our next adventure. "Ari, do you want to build a raft with me?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IT WASN'T much of a raft, but it didn't have to be. Not when there was only a tiny baby for it to hold and a siren to guide the makeshift vessel along. But we had to take a slower pace than we had before, and as the hours passed, Erys persuaded me to stop at one island and then another. We found a goat herd on one of the islands. I wrestled a goat and tried to feed the baby with its milk, but it didn't seem to help much. The baby struggled with the waterskin and spit up just as much of the goatmilk as he swallowed. He cried whenever he wasn't sleeping, whenever I wasn't singing to him. It only made us more desperate to reach our goal.

When I entered the more familiar water near the shore of the southern part of Solis, I was completely drained, and Erys's ghostly image had mostly faded. I walked the streets of a sleepy fishing village and then stood outside the monastery graveyard, waiting. It was one of the rules I had to heed as a siren. I could not enter the grounds of the monastery without being invited. None of Valadern's creatures could. Luckily, I didn't have to wait quietly. I sang and screamed and even summoned a few storm clouds until a few nuns poked their heads out of the dorms, and one of my sisters was sent to investigate.

Catra, the younger of the twins, squinted at me until she saw the red-faced baby in my arms. He had been crying along with me—or perhaps because of me. I had woken him up.

I hadn't gotten much sleep either. I swayed on my feet. My damp and windblown hair hung around my shoulders in clumps, and my stola lay in tatters. It was so much a sight that Catra shook her head at the both of us. "What have you been doing with him? Give him here."

“He’s Erys’s baby,” I said, but that was the only explanation I had for her, shaking off any other questions. I had gotten him here to safety, like I had promised both Erys and Helene, and that was all I had in me at the moment. Catra took the baby, beckoning me to follow her through the graveyard and into the central building.

I walked the halls, still silently playing with my torn sleeve. The decorations were different here than the ones in the Solian palace and even the streets of Cypari. Instead of embellished bodies of stone, there were icons to the One God, showing him as a baby and then as a tortured sacrifice. I wondered again how such a pathetic god had come to rule all that had come before. He certainly didn’t seem the type to summon another army that could match the ones I had seen in Cypari, but something must have happened to explain the shift away from the old gods.

Perhaps He had some power I still didn’t understand, despite all of Sister Leah’s attempts to explain it to me.

Catra and I entered the room she shared with our other sister. She went to a cot where Corva rested, murmuring something into her twin’s ear.

Then she handed the baby to her and left, leaving the door open.

Corva sat up, bringing the baby to her breast with an easy confidence. And when her own child cried for her, she made room for her as well, like she had been raising twins from the start. After fumbling around with Erys’s ghost, struggling to care for only one baby, it seemed a marvel to behold. “You’re an amazing mother, Corva.”

She frowned, with a bit more seriousness than I ever would have expected from my sister. “Perhaps I am, for now. When all I have to do is feed and change them. But I really would like . . . Catra and I, we’re happy here. But raising a child like this . . .”

I understood then. “You want to find another family to raise her?”

Corva nodded. “After she is weaned. I really want her to have a father, but I just can’t . . .” She blinked and looked back down at the baby in her arms. “There aren’t a lot of men I trust.”

“You want to take the vows and join the sisters.”

“Catra already has,” she said. “Months ago, right before Sister Leah died.”

It made sense. None of my sisters’ experiences with men had been very positive. And I knew plenty of happy nuns. There was a time I might have even celebrated the idea of my sisters finding their place on the surface

world by joining the order here. I couldn't muster much emotion anymore, but I would not fault her choice. "Have you decided who you would like to raise her?"

She glanced at me shyly. "Well, I always thought I would give her to you—to you and Jonas. He was here with us, when we were waiting for you to return from the underworld." Something in her eyes turned wistful as she recalled the memory. "He even helped when she was born, and he's so much fun to tease, but I could just tell he loved you. I started to think, if it were you and him together, and then I could be the aunt and . . . I'm sorry."

I had been staring at her. Pain came with every word she spoke, though part of the pain was sweet. "It was a lovely thought," I said. Then I played over her words again. "But you know that Jonas and I . . . that we're not . . . ?"

"Well, yes," she said, and her eyes flittered away. "He's with his family now, but he still comes sometimes to check in on us. And ask about you. I think he thinks that if you were to change your mind about things, that you would end up here."

"He thinks this is where I would go if I weren't a siren anymore." I supposed that made sense. He knew this was where I left the heart.

"Yes. And Ari . . ." She squinted at me like I was some new puzzle. "I guess I don't understand. You're a siren, but you aren't the same as we were."

I pulled on my torn sleeve and saw the tattoos on my arm. I had been brought so low, and I was certain I was worse than them. "I attacked him."

"No." The word was firm, unshakable. "He told us what happened. And yes, it was awful, but you let him go. I can tell you that Catra and I never would have been able to do that. Not with anyone, let alone a man we truly wanted. Sirens are corrupt and monstrous devils, but you're strong, Ari. You could come back. So I guess all of us want to know what is stopping you."

I shook my head, my whole body trembling. I looked for Erys, and though I thought I saw the outline of his figure, I couldn't hear him. I was on my own. "I'm not strong. I can't . . . I can't because of Erys." I let the last bit out as a whisper, our relationship something I still didn't know how to admit to. "I don't know what happened, but I see Erys. He's the one who gave me his heart, and I think it made him a part of me somehow. I think seeing him is the only reason I haven't started to feed like a normal siren

would. He speaks to me and . . .” I stopped. The words sounded mad even in my own ears. “I know you think I just can’t get enough of the magic, and maybe that was true, but I know if I do this, he’ll be gone, and I just don’t want to lose him again.”

Corva took the time to consider my words. “Do you love him?”

I didn’t know what I felt anymore. It had all become too much. “I guess I’m still afraid to go on without him.” Was that love? An attachment that even a siren could feel?

Erys was the one to bring me from my island and stay with me throughout all my darkness. He would always be a part of my heart and soul.

“You’re strong, Ari.”

I tightened my fist. Her praise of my strength felt empty. I had wanted to be strong, but it hadn’t been enough. I couldn’t defeat Valadern with the same bloody strength he carried. “I don’t want to be strong anymore. I don’t want to fight a war I can’t win.”

Corva finally seemed to understand. “You came here for the heart? You want to be human again?”

I nodded, still unable to say the words. I hadn’t wanted to lose Erys or the power and control I thought I had as a siren, but I had found some things far worse than death. Far worse than weakness. I wouldn’t linger in the shadows of my mistakes anymore.

“Then you have to try it. I will keep the children safe for when you return.”

My sister said it like she still expected me to take both of them from her. To not only become human again but also marry Jonas and give her daughter a father. But of all the things that were broken, I still saw that as the least likely to be restored.

I looked back at the babies, now resting together in the cot. Little Erys was finally peaceful, and my niece was an innocent angel with cherubic curls across her forehead. “What is her name?” I should have asked months ago. I was sure I would have had I been human.

That was something most human aunts wanted to know.

“Her name is Aleah,” my sister said.

Aleah. I could understand why Corva might want to name her daughter after Sister Leah, but to have my initial there as well . . . She really had

intended to give the baby to me, right from the start. An honor I didn't deserve. An honor I had failed.

The guilt made me want to collapse in on myself. I had chosen one path, living my life based on a single purpose, but there was so much I could have done instead.

Movement flickered in the corner of my eye. Corva made a sign with both hands, wiggling her fingers. She was telling someone to "wait," but when did she learn how to sign? Who was she signing to?

Then I knew. She had said that Jonas told her about us, but Jonas couldn't speak. I finally turned. Behind me, Catra had returned, and silently standing next to her was Jonas.

He stood in the doorway, his features washed in shadow. I blinked at him, then looked back at Catra. It really was a trial to have two sisters who worked together like twins—they were always scheming together. Having one to distract me, one to bring him. How long had he been here? "You heard all that?"

He gave me the weak ghost of a smile I knew so well. He started to sign. "Mute guard. Best at eavesdropping."

I backed away. His words carried with them a memory of something I couldn't yet face. "I came here for the heart. I'm going to destroy it." I didn't know how to apologize for everything else, but that was where I would start.

He stepped after me. "You let me come with you?"

"You still want to?"

"As long as you not eat me." He gave me another wanning sort of smile.

I tried to return it. "Well, maybe you should keep your distance, then. But yes, I would like you to come."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BLOODY AND RAW, the heart rested in the same satchel I had used to carry it out of the underworld. My old knife was there as well. I strapped them on, next to my waterskin. Gathering my courage, I walked hip-deep into the sea with a mortal and a ghost behind me.

I gazed across the waters and started to sing, but not for the storms. And not to ensnare a man or anyone else. The water rippled, and then Serena appeared. The blond in her hair shimmered like sunlight on the water, and her stola moved freely in the breeze. Her gaze lingered on the two figures behind me, and then her eyes tracked my hands as I pulled out the satchel. “Are you ready then?”

“Yes. I think we all are.” I swallowed and ran my hands up and down my torso. I would still be losing Erys, but it had to be this way. We couldn’t continue like this. We had become much too entangled, and we were hurting each other. I kept my eyes facing forward. I handed the blood-stained satchel to my sister, and then I backed away. “When I went to Cypari, I found out that Valadern took Erys’s body. Is there . . . is there any way you could use the heart to help us defeat him?”

Serena’s head jerked upward. “His body has been preserved?”

“Yes. Valadern has been using it, but maybe if we destroy the heart and break our bond, he won’t be able to anymore?” That had to end things, didn’t it?

I didn’t know what else to try.

Serena’s face grew thoughtful. “Perhaps . . . but it could also mean something else.” Her eyes narrowed. “You could return the heart to his

body. Reverse the curse completely. I could help you to return his spirit and your prince—”

“Erys would be alive again.” My heart thrilled, then plummeted. I glanced back at Jonas. “But . . . I promised . . .” I shook my head, unsure how to explain. I certainly wanted the man I still saw as my brother to be alive again if it were at all possible, but everything I had tried led to more disaster. I had finally found the courage to give Erys up, and what if rushing after this new hope set back all the progress I had been making? “I promised Jonas I wouldn’t use that kind of magic again. Even if Erys . . .

Jonas made some violent signs I didn’t know. I suspected it was because they were curse words he never taught me or used in my presence before. “You not have to kill him for me. You told me Prince was your brother. If that is true—you know I have sisters too. Our family is important.” He reached for my hand as he completed the last few signs. “We just need to help him together this time. Something we can both agree on. Promise me?”

Tears misted my eyes, something I could finally feel on my own. Jonas was the best man I had ever known. I might not deserve his help, but I wanted it desperately. “I promise.”

Jonas nodded and then gestured back to Serena. “Then let’s take the heart to Cypari and get Prince back.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

WHEN WE RETURNED to the monastery, Jonas went to gather some supplies for the trip, and I wandered around the stone crosses and cherubs on the grounds outside. I stopped at Sister Leah's grave. I still didn't know how to mourn the fallen men and women I had seen in Cypari, but I could mourn her. Or at least, I mourned her absence from my life because I knew she had to be happy in heaven with the God she served. If she had been alive, I would have asked for her advice. I would have asked her how the lowly God she worshiped had defeated all that came before, and if He could do so again. Or maybe I would have merely asked her to hold me, because as much as I was dark and broken, I knew she still would have held me no matter what form I had chosen to take.

Grass rustled behind me, and Jonas silently rested his hand on my shoulder. It wasn't a significant gesture. He often had to do things like that just to announce himself without words. But he didn't seem to be in a hurry to move his hand, so I soaked in the warmth of his presence. I wished I could feel more than just his hand, to have both his arms wrapped around me again, but at least he wasn't a ghost. I couldn't even see Erys at the moment and would take whatever scraps of affection Jonas was still willing to give. I knew I should just be grateful he was still willing to help me at all, and I would try my best to be worthy of it.

I stood to join him, and we traveled the seas together. I swam and towed Jonas along, and just like I had with the baby, we stopped at a few islands to let him rest.

When we reached the shore of the island nation, Erys reformed his spirit beside me with relative ease, but Jonas sputtered.

I hadn't been able to properly show off my prowess to Jonas yet. I couldn't help but show a little pride, and even smile a little over his distress. "Admit it, there are some advantages to me being a siren. After the legendary war, it took one of its heroes seven years to get home."

Jonas had been easier to drag through the sea than the baby had been. Or at least, we didn't have to stop as often. But he still didn't look grateful.

Jonas shook more water from his face and started to sign. "That . . . awful. You have no idea."

"Actually, I do." The memories were deep, buried by time and a siren's curse, but they were still there. "My sisters. Sometimes they would tow me around with them. I would almost drown, but they never were that sympathetic."

His eyes softened. "That sounds awful."

"Better than being alone," I said, letting my curtain of damp hair fall around my eyes. If I didn't go out to the sea with my sisters occasionally, I would have been left behind on the island all on my own. I feasted on whatever crumbs of affection my family had to offer me, even when I knew it was twisted and wrong. I had nothing else to fill my emptiness.

Was it any wonder I made some mistakes along the way? Even when I had a proper table of love set before me, I hadn't known what to do with it. I ran back to what had been familiar and made myself more miserable than I had ever been before.

"You not alone anymore, and Ari . . ." Jonas reached for my hand, brushing against it as he continued to sign. This wasn't like when he had touched my shoulder or even when he allowed me to take him across the sea. He actually wanted to hold my hand again, and something inside me soared. "I glad you told me that. I want you to tell me and not to hide. I know things were hard for you. I always knew that. I never cared that your mother and sisters were sirens or that you struggle sometimes to find your way. I struggle sometimes too. I just wanted to come along with you and find something better in our future. You understand?" He finished the sign near his forehead.

I nodded, though I still couldn't face him, terrified that the soft stirring between us would turn into something I couldn't control. That my soulless hunger would emerge, dark and ravenous. I would desire him too much and move faster than he wanted to go. I would attack him again and lose him forever. Even as I resisted, I knew that things might never go back to the

way they were between us, but I was grateful he had come. Not only because I thought I might still love him, but because I had just realized that Erys hadn't said a word to caution me. The warning had come to me on my own. And though Erys had told me a lot about the legendary war, he never told me about the hero who had taken seven years to get home. I had just known it when I hadn't known it before.

Erys wasn't speaking, but I still knew more of what only he knew, and this couldn't be the first time. His ghost had faded to even less than he was before. I had to find a way to fix this, and I couldn't do it on my own.

Jonas smiled and brushed back a lock of my damp hair before he stepped away. "We use raft next time," he signed. "I not care how long it takes."

Stuck on a raft with Jonas for seven years? If that was really what he wanted, then I was happy to agree. We just needed to get rid of our ghost chaperone. Erys needed his own body and his own life, or things would never work between me and Jonas or anyone else.

I needed to be fully human, so I could make another choice all on my own.

Jonas gathered up his spear, and we continued down the shore together. When the remnants of the villages and army camps appeared, along with a few broken bodies, our hands joined together, and I could not say which one of us had reached for the other first. I saw the horror of the scene again through his eyes, and there was no more room for any levity.

My throat dried, and my words were choked. "Is it . . . Do you think it's my fault? Because I didn't stop them?"

Jonas stared out for an agonizing moment before he answered with a shake of his hand. "I not know if you could have stopped it, but I glad you came back, and that you not help cause it. There were armies full of men who made their own choices. I just not want you to be one of them."

"I don't want to be part of it. I promise." As I said the words, I knew that much was true.

I made far more mistakes than I should have, but I had never wanted any of this.

And if we could find a way to stop it from growing worse, a way that a good man like Jonas would approve of, that was all I wanted now.

We continued toward the city. The smell of blood and waste reached me first, when the walls were still a few leagues away. The gates stood open,

and more broken corpses lined the city streets. Women. Men. I caught a glance of a smaller body and quickly turned away.

My eyes went back to find the empty shore. The Solian ships were gone.

Valadern and his army had already breached the capital city and moved on.

Jonas moved his spear beside me, and I remembered that his childhood farm had once been raided this way, only on a smaller and more personal scale. They had killed his father and intended to make use of his mother and elder sisters. He had gotten the scar on his neck and only barely escaped with his life.

“Do you think anyone is left?” he signed.

I wanted there to be, for his sake if no one else’s. As a child, Jonas had helped rebuild his family out of tragedy. I had only seen them as lovely and strong. Almost too good to touch, but if they once had been similarly broken, then it really should be no wonder that they had always wanted to help me as well. I couldn’t let all his hopes and efforts be in vain.

I pulled open one door and then another. When we came near the square, movement flashed out of the corner of my eye. A young girl gasped, first in surprise and then in recognition. “You were the girl. The one who saved us when the guards came.”

“Yes,” I said, touching my chest and gesturing Jonas forward to share in my relief. “Can you tell me what happened here? How long ago did the men leave, and how many of you were spared?”

A man came out from behind the rubble to stand in front of the girl, his wary eyes on Jonas like he was the one to fear. It really was quite ridiculous. I was far more dangerous than Jonas could ever be, but if it made them feel more comfortable talking with us, I wouldn’t complain. The man shook his head, gazing over the ruins. “They got through the gates a few days ago, but they didn’t stay long. I think they were as tired of the fighting as the rest of us. They focused mostly on the gold and women in the palace when they filled their ships and claimed their spoils. We weren’t important enough for them to go looking for, so long as we stayed hidden and didn’t resist.”

I hoped that meant a great many more survivors were hiding in the ruins unseen, though we wouldn’t be able to stay long enough to uncover them all. “So, they took Helene?”

The man nodded grimly. “Their prince, he took our princess and killed everyone who stood against him. Even his own father.”

Valadern killed Zeus? I supposed that made sense. Valadern had wanted to follow the old legends and restore the power of the old gods, but once he succeeded, he wouldn’t want to put himself behind anyone. Still, we had come all the way back here, and it seemed I should finish the journey and see the proof for myself.

Jonas and I went to the palace and found the fallen vessels of the former gods. The emperor, who had once been the vessel of Zeus. Naman, who had been the God of War.

Only Valadern was not in the number of the dead.

“Valadern,” I said, making a fist at the ruins. I hated him and all he had done. I went back to the surviving villagers and found that a few more had come out of hiding. Maybe a full family? I tried to address them all. “We will go and do our best to save the princess and anyone else they took captive. Will you be safe here?”

I couldn’t promise safety where we were going, but I felt I should offer something.

The man nodded. “If you actually can kill that prince and save our princess, then that will be more than enough.”

I nodded, and I reached for Jonas again. It would be another long journey, but this time, we would find a boat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I TOOK a few hesitant steps on the shore toward the seaside palace and stopped. We had found a fishing boat and gone straight to Solis, but Valadern had the same powers I did. He was burdened by more men, but he also had finer ships and experience I did not. He had already won his contest with Ares and even turned the tables on Zeus. He had made himself the god of this land.

So, I wasn't surprised to see more men running in and out of the palace like bees in a hive. A part of me was even glad to see them there. That we wouldn't have to waste any more time searching. We needed to face Valadern to stop more of his grab for power and restore Erys, but we could be walking into the same exact trap we had before.

"You should let me go ahead," Jonas signed. "Valadern not know about me yet. Or at least, I don't think he does. I can talk to other guards."

"Maybe that's a good idea," I said, but I already knew the carnage I would find. Valadern had destroyed Cypari, and if he was following the old legends, he would have returned here and killed any of the men still trying to take the emperor's throne. I looked to Erys and then back to Jonas again. "But maybe we should try something else instead. Have I told you about when Erys and I fought my mother?"

Walking into the palace now was like walking onto the shores of Cypari. The same sorrow and stale air. No one came to stop me. Instead, corpses

littered the halls. My former suitors, senators and generals who sought to make themselves the new emperor. Some of the guards and slaves who gotten in the way. I recognized one with a beard and a belly, blood and wine spilled beside him. My nostrils flared, triggered by the rusted tang of the blood and the salt of the tears.

Erys flickered in and out, staying distant, but I did not need help from him to feel a twinge of pain. If I stayed in Cypari, or if I had never left the palace in the first place, could I have prevented this? Or would I have lost myself in all the bloodlust?

Either way, I was going to fix it now. There had to be something we could do.

Just like in Cypari, not everyone here was dead. There were a few survivors. I heard the scraping of chains. Soft moans. More slaves and war prizes.

I followed the soft sounds and smells through the dimly lit hallway.

When I reached the banquet hall, I saw them. The stolen Cypari were tethered and huddled together. Helene sat at their center, and even while submitting to all the abuse that had been done to her, she somehow seemed stronger than the girl I left behind. My eyes ran past the slaves and guards until I found Jonas. He had mixed into the crowd. I gave a subtle sign, just to show I had seen him, but I didn't linger. I didn't want to give him away.

Much like the time I had gone to face my mother on our dark island, the plan Jonas and I made was a simple one. It was the only plan we could make. I would come in and distract Valadern with all of my power. Jonas would see about sneaking in with the heart. And once Erys was restored, the fight would be over.

I would no longer be a siren, and we could all live out our lives the best we could.

Valadern smiled when he saw me. He still wore Erys's face and sat in his place at the banquet hall. He had made the Solian palace grislier than even the dark palace in the underworld, but the bodies and chained slaves surrounding him didn't seem to bother him at all. "So, Ari, I have conquered all the men who once sought your hand. And it may not surprise you to learn that the bride of my host isn't strong enough to stand by my side. She prefers to cower with the slaves, but I think I also prefer it that way. Now I can give you the throne that always should have been yours,

what your prince was never strong enough to offer you.” He raised his wine and gestured to the place beside him.

I shook my head. “I don’t care how many people you kill. You will not have me.” If he really thought he would, then it only proved that he did not know me at all. I had never wanted to marry Erys for his title, and that was all Valadern was offering me now.

Just an empty title, an empty vessel, with nothing left of the man I cared for and the virtue I had hoped to adopt as my own.

Valadern stood and walked over to me. “So, if you no longer wish to join me, then have you come to claim your own power? To see which one of us the legends will speak of?” He took a spear from one of the fallen suitors, and I was glad to follow his cue. I had already fought one champion match, and this was the opponent I had wanted from the start.

I attacked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I CALLED FOR THE STORMS, but so did he. Hail shot through the window, and a cloud of mist and fog soon followed. I couldn't see Jonas or anyone else in the banquet hall. I could only hope that meant Valadern would be similarly crippled and that he would be distracted enough for Jonas to creep closer and spring our trap. But as the storms continued to rage, that seemed less and less likely.

Furniture moved and crashed around me. Pain sliced down my arms as I held them in front of my face. I couldn't see anything but shadows, and my eyes stung with the upturned debris.

My eyes closed, searching for my center.

Valadern was a god, but he only had the power that I gave him. I had called for him when I went to the underworld and fell into his trap. I wouldn't do that again.

I wrestled some of the wind and rain into my control, opening my eyes. I tried to believe that I could be stronger than Valadern, but everything I saw told me that it wasn't true.

Valadern's powers and even Erys's small frame only seemed to grow in my eyes.

It was just another trap. He had wanted me to fight because he knew this would happen. Just like when I fought Naman. Ares. The more I fought, the stronger Valadern became.

He had once taken the powers of the God of Death, and now it seemed he had taken the powers of Zeus and Ares as well. He was the God of War, not the god of victory. Any battle fought made him stronger. And it made my own powers harder and harder to manage.

Jonas had been right from the start. This was a battle I couldn't win.
Or rather, the only way I could win was to lose.

I thought again of the weaker god of the monastery and how Erys had bound himself to me in death. I knew what I had to do and the final sacrifice I would have to make.

I tried to find Jonas again. I thought I saw his blurred image, but I wasn't sure, and I couldn't wait any longer.

"I'm sorry," I said, hoping the words would somehow reach him.

Then I dropped my blade and raced through the storm. A chair flew into my path. Pain flared through me as I collided into the wood, but I didn't stop. I ran to Valadern, and instead of attacking, I threw myself on the spear in his hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MY MOUTH OPENED WIDE in panic. I gasped for breath, and my vision blurred to strange flashes of color. But the pain ended faster than I anticipated. It seemed it didn't take that long for even a siren to die after such a direct blow. And as my spirit rose from my body, Erys was there. His shape was even firmer now than it had been before, clearer than his body lying empty on the floor and anything else in the room. He came to me and shook his head. "Ari, did you really just stab yourself?"

I winced out of reflex but soon straightened. I didn't need to fear him or anything else anymore. I had left it all behind, or at least, a part of me desperately wanted to. "Well, that was the deal you made—that he could use your body if it helped me. I was pretty sure killing me wouldn't count as helping me." I gestured to show him.

The storms had died down, leaving a mass of torn furniture and fallen bodies. Erys's body lay at the center. No new wound marred the prince's perfectly preserved corpse, but Valadern was gone.

"You're insane," Erys decided.

He was one to talk. "Or you could say thank you."

"No." He folded his arms in front of his chest. "That would mean that I accept, and I don't."

"Well, you have to. No point in the both of us dying," I said, parroting the words he had once said to me.

"We're not both dying." He pointed back to the ground, not at his corpse but at my own. "You're taking my heart, and you're going to live."

"I don't think that is how it works," I said, though the words came out with a tumble of emotions I couldn't quite name. I really hadn't been trying

to kill myself.

I had just wanted to defeat Valadern. Permanently.

And if I had to leave this world behind, I would miss far more than I thought I might.

“We’ll make it work,” Erys said. “You don’t have a choice anyway. You’re a ghost. Jonas is the only one of us still alive, and I’m betting he likes you more than me.”

Jonas. Had I forgotten about him again? No. I hadn’t forgotten. I loved him, and I had wanted to save him, taking the only open path I had seen. But Erys was right. We both were silent spectators now, as Jonas held the prince’s heart in my satchel.

He looked over the strewn corpses with wide eyes, shaking his head a few times like he thought he could make the images in front of him change into something different. Then, he sprung across the room and gathered my body in his arms.

He started down the path to the sea that would bring my sister to him, taking Erys’s heart but leaving the prince’s body behind.

“He hates me!” Erys leapt up like he had achieved some great victory. “I knew it! No one can be *that* nice!”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re impossible.” The words came out lightly enough, but inside I was roiling. Could I really allow this again, for my prince to give his chance at life away just to save me? It was the worst fate I could imagine.

I could never bear a debt that large to a man who had never been mine.

“Not impossible. Just very determined.” Erys grinned for another moment before he finally sobered. “I died almost a year ago, Ari. I never really thought we could change that. Perhaps we shouldn’t have ever tried—there are forces in this world that should stay beyond our control. I just wanted my death to mean something, and to know that the rest of you would be safe when I was gone. So, if you let me do this for you, then I promise that there will be no debt between us because there is something I need from you in return.”

I didn’t answer, almost afraid of what he might ask. If it was too small, it wouldn’t be a fair bargain. But what could I possibly give him that was worth his life?

Nothing.

“The baby,” he said in my silence. “You will take care of him?”

I gaped. “The heir of Solis? You want me to raise the heir of Solis?”

“I want you to raise my son . . . and yes, the heir of Solis.”

“I told you that’s not how these things work. Helene is his mother, and I can’t replace her as a princess or anything else.”

Erys shook his head. “You were born a princess and renamed as my sister, but that doesn’t mean you have to be like Helene. She might be my child’s mother, but as you said, he is the heir of Solis, and he will need more than a mother alone. He’ll need someone strong enough to protect him as he grows. And if it can’t be me, then I want it to be you.”

I wanted to protest again, but I knew my own power. Whether it be a song, the waves, or a simple spear, I was always fighting something. It would be truly a wonderful thing if I could find a way to use that gift only to protect the ones I loved. It was the change I wanted, if I ever had the chance to grasp life again. “Would they even let me? They might try to say I murdered you.” I had no idea what our exchange had looked like to any onlookers, but I could bet that it wasn’t good.

“If you did, that might make them respect you more. I bet half of them were hoping to murder me and become the regent. You’re the only one who could do it with my blessing.”

I frowned. “You really shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Sorry. I’m still a ghost. All my jokes tend to be a little morbid. But even if I lived . . . I don’t think I could have ruled as I wanted to. Or at least, it would have been more difficult. No one is going to believe Valadern was controlling my body, and after everything he did . . .” Erys stopped. We had already left the palace, unconsciously drifting after Jonas as he carried my body to the seashore, but Erys looked back on it again. “Helene would never accept me back, and I won’t ask her to. But my son won’t have that stain on him. You won’t. And Jonas . . . I want my son to have a family, and for you to have a chance to be with the one who truly has your heart.”

I didn’t know how to argue with any of his words, though a part of me still wanted to. “You had it once,” I said, though I wouldn’t deny that things had changed.

“Yes, and you know I wish I would have explored that option and fought more for you when I had the chance, but our time has passed, and it might be for the best. Jonas dragged you down here because he still loves you, and he will fight for you. I know you both together can help the empire be something better than it was.”

I supposed I would have to try, wouldn't I? Neither of us could go back and change what had been done, but there had to be some brightness we could reach for in our future.

Serena appeared in a spray of white foam. Jonas lowered my body next to her and made a series of signs while handing her the heart. "Save her. Please."

Serena shook her head. She didn't know how to sign, but she was the bride of the God of Death and could see what all others could not. She looked right past Jonas to rest her eyes on me. "Will you accept this, Ari? Your souls have already been intertwined, and if I use the heart in this way, you will be bound forever. I don't know what that kind of magic will lead to, but I know it cannot be completely undone."

Bound forever? Weren't we already? And if both of us died . . .

I looked to Erys's ghostly form beside me, but for once he was silent. He had already given me his opinion, and he was stubborn enough to die, really die, even if I refused. The only choice I had been given was if I wanted to keep living without him and do the task he had requested of me.

Death would have been so much easier, but that had never been my lot, and I would not fight it anymore. Erys wanted to die a hero, and I had found something I wanted to live for.

"I accept," I said.

Serena nodded and turned to Erys. "And you?"

"Of course I accept," he said, smiling at his victory.

"Then our bargain is at an end," Serena said. "Spend the years you have left wisely."

She backed away, her eyes closed. Nothing else seemed to change, but I knew she was working her magic again, that we only had a few moments left.

I looked to Erys. This had all become far too surreal. While we were both spirits, it seemed as though we could almost touch, but his image was already fading.

"Erys?" I called to him. I knew I had to give him up, but that did not take the pain away.

"Goodbye, Ari. I know I made a lot of mistakes, but I will always love and watch over you. Promise me you'll find some way to be happy." He paused for a moment, and then he smiled. "And if my son ever meets a

beautiful girl from another world, you tell him to marry her instead of calling her his sister.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

EVEN BEFORE I opened my eyes, I knew I was human again. My body ached, and I couldn't feel the sea. I tried to sit up. Jonas took my hand and then my face, blinking his relief and all the words he couldn't say.

"You . . . you gave me the heart?"

His mouth hung open, and he slowly let me go so he could sign. "I thought Prince would have wanted it this way."

Well, he was right, but I might struggle with the sacrifice Erys had made for some time yet. So much had happened, and it was still so hard to take.

Jonas followed my gaze to the sea. Empty waves of blue now that Serena had left us. "Is he gone now?" he signed.

My vision flickered left and right even though I already knew the answer. "Yes, but I think . . . He said that it was what he wanted, and I think he is happy," I said because I wanted to believe it was true, and I knew how powerful words could be. "I think he needed to move on, and so do I. Even if . . . Jonas, I am so sorry."

The remnants of the pain I had caused shined on his face. His words were scattered and broken. "You killed yourself. I saw you . . . Ari, we not decide on that together."

"You're right." Perhaps I really hadn't learned my lesson there at all. I was always going to dash ahead without thinking. It was a piece of my soul and character that couldn't just be wished away. Though in this case, I hoped I had helped just a little more than I hurt. "I'm sorry. I lost so much, and I just needed to protect you, to fix something I had broken. I saw a way to stop him, and I . . ."

He made a series of signs, his face resigned. "You were wonderful. You were brave, and you stopped a great evil. You saved everyone who is left, and you came back to me as soon as you were able. You came back. And now . . . ?"

"I'm going to stay here and see if I can help them rebuild something better." I hadn't taken any more time to think about it, but I knew that was what I wanted. I moved my hand back toward him. "I would like you to stay with me too, but if you can't . . ."

I really couldn't form the words, but I wanted this to be his choice, as much as it was mine.

Jonas made a quick fist to his heart. "I love you, Ari. I always have, even when I was angry and scared for you. You are human again, and we need to be together. I think we are better that way, so long as we are both committed and growing into something better than we were before. That's all I ever wanted."

I shook my head, still amazed at the beautiful boy who had been willing to wait for me through my trials and let me call him my own. "I love you too. Truly." My heart was a fickle and fragile thing, but as I said the words, I knew they were true. He was good and steady and helped me be better than I was alone. I might have chosen to love him before I felt it in my soul, but that seemed to be the way it should be. I had come from darkness, but I wanted to keep choosing the light, until it truly became a part of me. "I got lost trying to fix things on my own, but I always wanted to come back to you."

"And that will always be enough for me." He kissed my hand, and slowly we found each other's lips, finding a new rhythm that was softer and sweeter than it was before.

He knew of my past, and we talked of our future. He took my hand, and then another thought occurred to me. "Well, there is one more thing I should tell you. Erys is gone, and you will always be the man for me, but how do you feel about children?"

Eventually, we left the sand. Jonas went back to help the remaining guards, and my eyes fell on . . . Erys's wife? Princess Helene. I didn't know what

else she was now that Erys was dead, and she had married someone else who was now also dead. But someone had to untie her from the Cypari prisoners, and that someone might as well be me.

She trembled the whole time.

"I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say.

Her head shook, back and forth. Longer than should have been necessary. "You killed Erys. Somehow you killed him by stabbing yourself."

I sighed. "I know that's what it looked like, but it is a bit more complicated than that."

"Will you explain it to me?"

"If you will listen." I didn't expect anyone, much less Helene, to truly believe me, but I would try.

"And you will bring me to my son?" She looked even more hopeful, and I couldn't deny her.

I kept my voice firm. "Your son will still be the heir of Solis. He will need protection, and you will not be the only one who has claim to him."

"But you will help me."

"Yes." It was what I had already promised his father, after all, and Jonas had agreed.

She nodded, somehow looking relieved even after everything that had happened. "You know it was never you who caused the trouble between Erys and me. I still believe that. You are my family and a daughter of Cypari. I hope one day you will also call me your friend. And if you wish to tell my child stories of his father the way you remember him, I would be glad of that too." She bowed her head. "Perhaps there are things that we both can learn from each other."

A daughter of Cypari. Erys had wanted me to go to Cypari and learn of my heritage long before it had become a battlefield. It seemed every mistake I made on this journey, I would be made to pay for in full, but when I thought of the worn faces we had left on that island nation, I knew I wanted to return there soon and offer what help I could.

Jonas came back to join us, and the peace and hope I felt with him returned anew.

I really wouldn't have had it any other way.

EPILOGUE

THE TRUMPETS BLARED and filled the streets of the capital city of Solis. I stood on the outskirts of the crowd, a light smile on my face. My little Erys was a man now.

I had truly enjoyed our years together. Watching him grow. Exploring the world around us that was still almost as new to me as it was to him. And I loved it when he told me of his growing love for the girl who stood beside him.

Aleah, my niece and Corva's daughter, was today's bride.

Jonas and I had brought the girl and her mother from the monastery and into the palace the same day we had retrieved little Erys. The five of us, along with Helene, had formed a makeshift family until the children were weaned and Corva took the vows to join the sisters at the monastery, so many years ago. Now Solis's bright son and our moon daughter would merge again the land and the sea.

Every senator and magus still in the palace said it was politically motivated, of course. A way to keep our family on the throne now that little Erys was of age and our combined regency over Solis had expired. They said I always fancied myself a princess—maybe even a goddess—and would never give the power up, but it wasn't true. I had even tried to fight the coming marriage at times, wanting to make sure it was their choice.

Despite everything, their courtship had seemed as natural as breathing, and I couldn't be more pleased.

But my heartfelt joy over their childhood had been followed by a steady ache. The walls of the palace and the crowds of the city still felt a bit like a

prison, trapping me into a life that was no longer my own. Time had passed, and our makeshift family had to change yet again.

So in the midst of the wedding celebration, I waded knee-deep into the sea.

Waves touched the land in a steady pattern. Red and orange light danced across the blue as the sun lowered in the sky. The water cooled the heat of my skin. The salty tang of the sea breeze filled my nostrils, echoing the longing I once felt as a siren.

“You should see him,” I told Erys, rubbing at the faded tattoos on my arms. I still spoke to him sometimes, even though I no longer saw him. I wanted him to know of his son and how our family had grown and changed. “You would be so proud.”

“I already am.”

I startled, but I couldn’t forget that voice. “Erys?” I turned and there he was standing among the waves. Taller. Broader. But still no beard. “You . . . You were supposed to move on.”

He smiled. “I did. I promise I did. I’m not the same as I was before. Neither of us are.” He stepped forward, and the water broke into foam, moving around him. He wasn’t just a spirit anymore. Somehow, he had regained a form that was all his own. “And don’t you remember what Valadern told you? What it takes to be a god in the old way?”

Stories. Belief. I was no longer a siren, and I tried not to use my power over the storms, but it seemed I might still have some power in my voice. Serena had said there might still be some magic in the bond I had formed with the man I still called my brother, and as Helene had once suggested, I had read to the children from my father’s old book of fairy stories.

Erys had become the prince in every tale.

He would always be a prince to me.

“You always made me sound so much better than I ever really was,” he said, and then I tried the words out loud for myself.

“You’re a god, like Aides and Serena. I made you into a god?”

His grin broadened into something boyish and proud. “Yes, but only a minor one. I don’t think you gave me any special powers. But I’ve been able to visit the rest of my family, go wherever I think I can do some good. And that has been enough for me.”

“I missed you,” I said, and it was true. Things were not the same between us. Jonas was my husband, and I didn’t want that to change, but

Erys would always be my family and the twin sun to my moon. Having him in my life had made me so much better than I would have been alone.

He reached for my hand, and I could feel it. Warm and calloused and larger than my own. “I missed you too, Ari, but you were always stronger than I ever was. And really, I just came to thank you. I know how hard these last few years have been. I’ve been watching, and I’ve seen how much trying to be a princess and staying in one place stifles you. But that time is over now. You fulfilled your promise to me. The children are grown, and you should be free to live your own life now.” He gestured back to me, and I looked down at my arms. The faded tattoos made from blood that had marked me as a siren were finally gone, as if washed away in the surrounding water. “Go wherever the wind and waves take you, and even if you can’t always see us, I promise Serena and I will do our best to keep you safe.”

My throat constricted. I couldn’t speak. But my toes sank deeper into the wet sand, and I came to him. I hugged my brother and my prince. His chest was so warm beneath me. His heart thudded in time with mine. He lifted me up, like he just wanted to prove that he could, but we soon tumbled to the ground, laughing.

I knew he wouldn’t be able to stay, that he never could, but I was at peace when he faded from my sight again. I knew he was watching and that would be enough for me.

My silent husband came to find me later, as the light of the moon had taken its place in the darkened sky, and as we came together, it seemed that the sea could touch land, and my mind and heart could be joined together as one.

There were some battles I couldn’t win, and this one I couldn’t even try to fight.

So, I told Jonas what had happened with Erys, as I told him all my secrets now. Jonas kissed away my tears, and when my voice returned, I told him again of the goatherders of Galath, the groves of Cypari, and all the other places I still wished to see. How we would climb mountains, dance through fields, and maybe even have our own moon child who would grow up as a water sprite, as loved and as wild as I always wanted to be.

He smiled as I led him deeper into the waves and said, “Jonas, do you want to build a raft with me?”

THE END



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

So, can I just say that the Iliad and the Odyssey are full of some really nasty stuff? I mean, I know they are classics and important for understanding parts of our history, but they're seriously dark. And if any of you are wondering why this series took me longer to write than some of my others of similar length, that's the reason. C. S. Lewis once said that he cut *The Screwtape Letters* short and never wrote any sequels because of the darkness he had to inhabit to write from the perspective of a demon, and I completely get it.

But at least I was able to keep my promise and give my romantic leads a happy ending, all while playing with the idea presented in Hans Christian Anderson's story of *The Little Mermaid*. No, the prince doesn't end up with the mermaid in that version either, but if they ever were to, it was dependent on the prince sharing his mortal heart and conscious with the soulless mermaid.

And I mostly thought that could get kind of twisted, but kind of beautiful too.

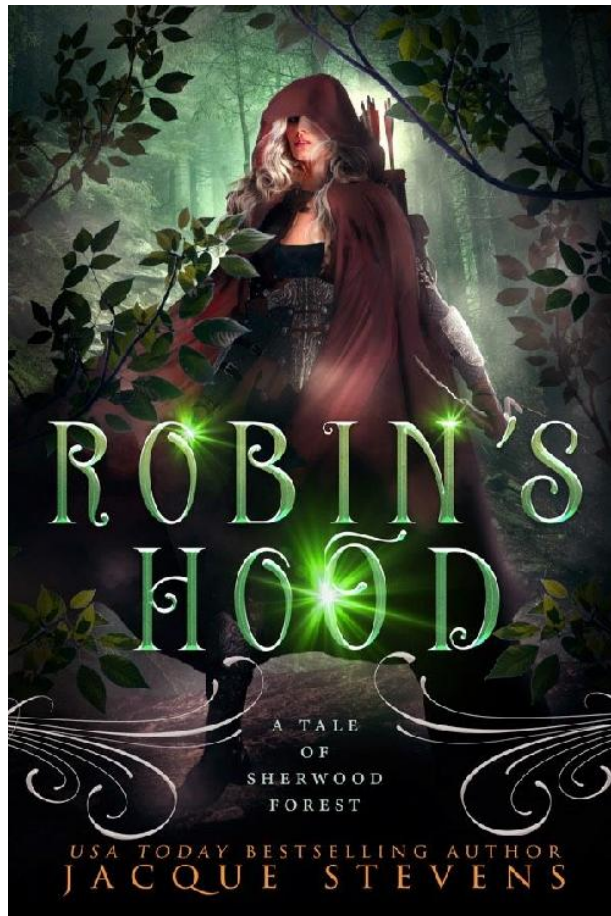
So, I wrote my twisted fairytale, and now I plan to detox with copious amounts of rainbows and unicorns. I will be writing an epic dragon fantasy next and a much lighter fairytale series. I hope to see some of you there!

Thank you so much for reading STORMS: A Tale of the Little Mermaid. If you enjoyed the story, please consider leaving a review on Amazon and Goodreads. Your feedback can make a huge difference in increasing this book's visibility and improving future novels.

You can also reach me directly at sjacquebooks@gmail.com or my website sjacquebooks.com.

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EXCERPT: ROBIN'S HOOD

I have heard ballads of our adventures already. A few favor the sheriff, saying we're all cutthroats and devil worshipers, but most speak of merry outlaws doing clever deeds. They even call us noble for our gifts to the poor. They will be sure to love our latest trick—the finest of all Robin Hood's adventures. How we finally confronted the sheriff and his men directly, saved an innocent from the noose. Almost killed ourselves in the process.

Oh, how the bards will sing.

They love a lusty and poetic tale, rarely caring if they get any of the details right. But I still wonder how their songs will change once they discover the long blond locks of the girl who really wore the hood. Will they say I was born wild, that I naturally picked wooden swords over dolls or enjoyed caking myself with mud? Will they describe my poor, long-suffering parents chasing me around a castle with a dress, begging me to wear it just this *once*?

They will be wrong on both counts. My parents died when I was a mere girl of five summers, and I was well-contented in my maidenhood. I would have been happy to sit in a long skirt and embroider all through the night, but the boys wouldn't. They wanted to run through the forest and climb the ramparts. So, I did too.

I didn't want to be a boy. I just didn't want to be alone.

Truly, I made for a terrible boy. They were faster. They were stronger. I was just there. And sometimes, they didn't want me there at all.

"You can't keep up, Mare," Rob would say—it was always Rob because Gale knew better. "Why don't you climb a tree? Say you got locked in a

tower? Get all painted up, and we'll come and rescue you later."

That would not appease me. The last time I agreed to something like that, the cook came calling with apple tarts, and I never got rescued.

I pointed over to my brother, just as lanky and towheaded as I was, and less than a hand-span taller. "Why can't Gale be captured?"

"Gale wouldn't be. He's faster." Rob laughed, and his hood slipped over his eyes. The cloak was a large one he had taken from his father because he thought it made him seem more grown up. It did the exact opposite. He was nothing but a loudmouthed boy, and I suddenly decided I wanted nothing to do with him.

"You should just marry Gale!" I cried, and I crossed my arms to show how upset I was.

But when I yelled, Rob became more offensive. He shouted back. "Mayhap I will marry Gale, and you can stick your head in a trough if you don't like it!"

Rob and I were already married, but neither of us understood marriage then.

All I knew was that my husband preferred to play with my brother instead of me, and it wasn't fair. Nor was it fair when King Richard came calling for an army, and both of them left me behind for good.

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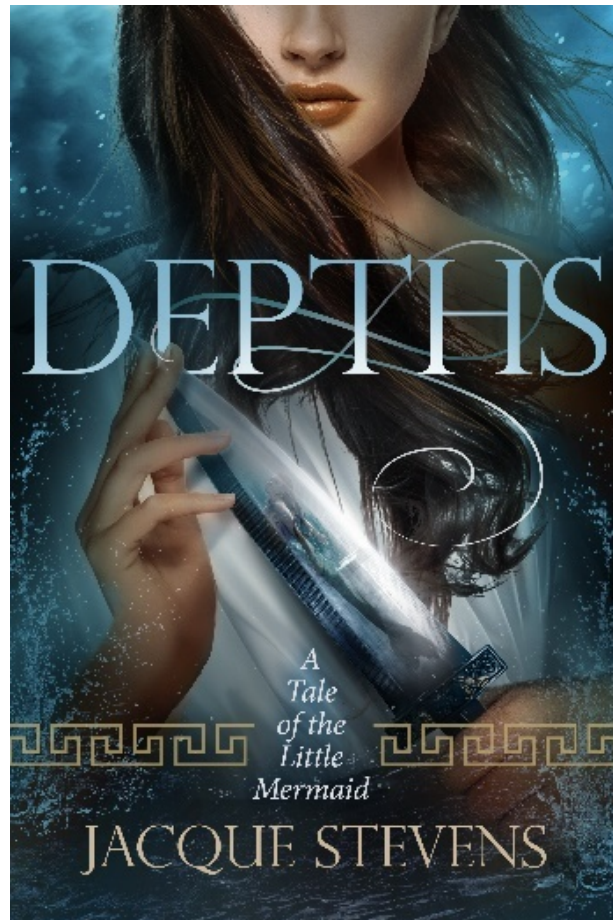


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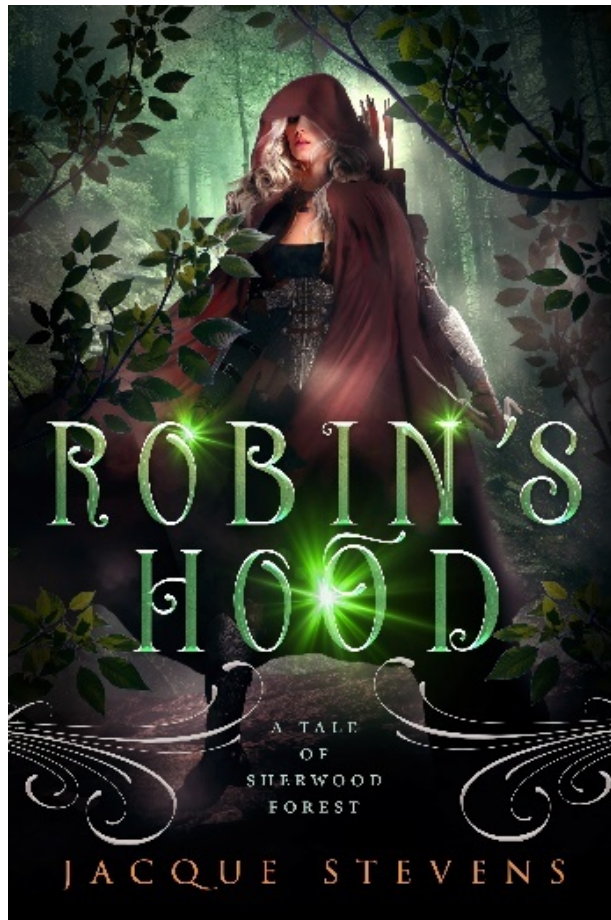


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jacquie Stevens wrote her first novel as a stress relief activity during nursing school. Now, as a USA-Today Bestselling Author, she has taken a step back from nursing so she can spend all her time writing stories filled with elves, fairies, and all things awesome. She also is a freelance editor.

Jacquie lives in Arizona where she can be found walking the streets with a dark and handsome young man who loves everything about her. He's a shiba inu mix.

New friends, enemies, and wandering visitors from cyberspace can contact Jacquie here: sjacquiebooks.com or [sjacquiebooks\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:sjacquiebooks(at)gmail.com).

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